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**Dancing the Tiekiedraai:
A Socio-historic Approach to Bosman's Bushveld
Narratives**

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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature

Date: 20 January 2002

Signed by candidate

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My beloved sister, Catherine, intellect, poet and dark side of me

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Abstract

The name 'Herman Charles Bosman' is a familiar one to South Africans, and his narratives have been celebrated widely for their skilful construction, their humour and the unique way in which they capture a segment of South African rural life. While Bosman is regarded as a significant figure in South African literature, it is less commonly accepted that his narratives were more than cleverly devised pieces of social realism. In the past, critics have largely either regarded Bosman's work as existing 'outside' of politics - even commending him for his ability to disregard the 'obsession' with politics reflected in the texts of other South African writers - or they have criticised him for producing 'racist' narratives which vindicated white supremacy. There are a number of reasons why Bosman's work was not regarded as an important constituent in the literary struggle against racial discrimination in South Africa, not the least being that he was an Afrikaner. His ethnic identity, combined with the fact that his writing was difficult to categorise because it was so different from the other literature being produced at that time, meant that his narratives have often been misunderstood, and their social message largely ignored.

My argument, in this thesis, is that the particular and very real forms of censorship placed on South African writers beg a closer look not only at what is being said, but the *way* in which it is said. In other words, because Bosman's fiction does not openly and overtly condemn apartheid thinking does not, by any means, signify that he was unaware of social reality, nor unwilling to portray it. On the contrary, what is remarkable about Bosman's narratives is the unique, unflinching manner in which he documents racial discrimination in South Africa. What *Dancing the Tiekiedraai* attempts to do is relook at Bosman in light of recent theories of storytelling and 'truth', presenting the argument that the bushveld narratives comprise an important element of South African 'history' by their honest depiction of a segment of South African rural life. It focusses attention on the various methods Bosman used to impart his important socio-political message, and argues that in the large-scale 're-writing' of South African historical text under a democratic government, the narratives constitute a significant 'window' into the foundations of and circumstances surrounding the legislation of apartheid.

It is my belief that an analysis of the bushveld narratives in the light of recent theories of knowledge and storytelling is a necessary move towards understanding the value of the stories, and gaining a better appreciation of Bosman's skill as a writer, and this thesis challenges earlier critical approaches which fail to engage with his oftentimes overtly political message. *Dancing the Tiekiedraai* is an attempt to illustrate the fact that Bosman's narratives are not simply another 'white' voice telling a 'black' story, but rather a South African voice participating in the extraordinary challenge of constructing a version of South African history.

Introduction

It is a feat for any writer to have new editions of his work appear on book-shop shelves fifty years after they were written, particularly when the writing was done in a context such as South Africa's, where political tumult has profoundly affected our evaluation of art. Given the extreme nature of the socio-political divide between white and black South Africans living under the apartheid regime, and the concomitant injustices of this racist system of government, art has largely been judged on the strength of its political message; in other words, how well and how effectively it engaged with, and contributed to, the extermination of segregationist politics. Readers' continuing interest in the narratives of Herman Charles Bosman can be attributed to various things, overridingly his unique and unusual gift for storytelling. Another reason, however, is his fascination with the Afrikaners whom he chooses to depict in his tales, and the racist ideologies which became legislated under the term 'apartheid'. While this system of government has metamorphosed into the form of quasi-democracy which exists in the present day, South Africa continues to face social and economic struggle, and the ideologies which fuelled apartheid continue to have a profound effect on the lives of the South Africans living in its aftermath.

While Herman Charles Bosman's fiction has been praised for its skilful storytelling, the contribution it made to furthering the short-story genre in South Africa, and for the interest it catalysed in South African literature generally, its politics has not attracted very much interest. In Gray's (1986) collection of critical essays on Bosman, there is only one (written by Glenn Lawson in 1982) which focuses with any depth on Bosman's depiction of South African social reality. Vivienne Dickson, in the same collection, goes so far as to say that "Bosman... seems to have been much too involved with his personal life to show any of that obsession with racial conflicts which have been so marked in some of his contemporaries" (Gray, 1986: 147). This is an intriguing statement when so many of Bosman's bushveld stories concern themselves directly with race, and are devoted to a meticulously constructed recording of Afrikaner ideology. Yet, judging by the angle taken by most critics in Gray's (1986) collection, this statement seems to apply to the majority of Bosman reviewers who overlook the complex metaphors, and the use of irony and symbolism to impart a highly politicised and very particular message.

Perhaps it is due to the context in which Bosman wrote that the importance of what he says has not been adequately acknowledged. It is my argument, in this dissertation, that the contribution Bosman made to challenging South Africa's racist social system and the history contained in his Groot Marico narratives is every bit as important as the 'anti-apartheid' writing which emerged in the decades following his death. To summarise briefly what I will discuss in Chapter One, prior to the development of what became classified as 'political' writing, white South African fiction was largely

dominated by a genre termed the *plaasroman*, or 'farm novel'. This type of writing, which gained prominence during the first few decades of the twentieth century, made a significant contribution to Afrikaner nationalism by justifying, through its subject matter and style, white, Afrikaner appropriation of the land. In short, the *plaasroman* novels ignored the realities of colonialism and focused instead on what Coetzee (1991) calls the *verlore vlakte* (lost plains) of South Africa. These novels ignore South African racial conflict, and turn their attention instead to what is perceived as their farmer protagonists' Godly right to the land. In this way they were instrumental in formulating the various myths regarding the Afrikaner *volk*, myths which formed the cornerstones of apartheid thinking.

Parallelling *plaasroman* writing was a genre developed by English-speaking white South Africans who wrote with a view to being published overseas, as Gray (1986) explains. These fictional works, which emerged in the later 1800s and very early 1900s, were written for a market whose interest was in an exotic, adventure-story depiction of Africa. These were highly marketable and easily consumed tales of conquering heroes and hostile landscapes, and like *plaasroman* writing, the genre overlooked South Africa's less palatable social realities. In the midst of these adventure stories designed for a European audience, and the *plaasroman*'s large-scale promotion of Afrikaner nationalism, Afrikaner Herman Charles Bosman constructed his own 'farm novels' in a style which was the antithesis of what his contemporaries were doing. In contrast to the romance of the 'adventure tales' and the green, rolling hills of the *plaasroman* novels, Bosman's farms were set in a drought-ridden area of the north-western Transvaal, and his farmers are a far cry from the colonising heroes of Afrikaner mythology. In significant ways his fiction parodied the *plaasroman* novels by presenting a very unglamorous picture of life in rural South Africa. The small community living on the outskirts of the desert are as much victims of circumstance as the *plaasroman* farmers are heroes, and with their Dopper mentality and racist, survivalist ethos, these farmers comprise a far more realistic depiction of a segment of South African society than the farmers of the *plaasroman* do.

While Bosman certainly achieved commercial success (as I explain in my biographical note on him), the difficulty critics had 'placing' him has meant that his fiction has not received the kind of attention I believe it deserves. Adding to the difficulty in placing Bosman amongst his contemporaries was the fact that he wrote in three different, and fairly distinct, styles. Firstly, his novel *Jacaranda in the Night* and his poetry collections took on the form of what Gray (1986) describes as "romantic, psychosexual, 'Lawrentian' rhapsodising" (p.25); then, there is the frank 'journalism' of *Cold Stone Jug*, and finally, the ironic realism of the proliferation of bushveld narratives. Adding to the confusion which prevails in much Bosman criticism is the fact that he did not 'develop' from one mode to the next, but operated simultaneously in the three different modes (Gray, 1986), some of his accomplishments being incomparably more skilful than others.

Bosman criticism in the present day is sparse, the most comprehensive body in existence being the collection of essays I refer to earlier compiled by Stephen Gray in 1986. This collection is extremely useful in providing an overview of critical responses to Bosman's work, and includes an interesting - and important for any Bosman researcher - section of essays written by Bosman himself. In 1981 Jonathan Ball edited the first *Collected Works of Herman Charles Bosman*, and in 1965 David Goldblatt travelled to the Groot Marico himself where he tracked down some of the descendents of Bosman's characters and spoke to them about his fiction. Their photographs, and photographs of the Groot Marico as it looked in the sixties, are included in *The Illustrated Bosman* (1993). Mitzi Andersen has made Bosman's very early writing available in a collection titled *Herman Charles Bosman: The Prose Juvenilia* (1998). This collection includes writing published during his days at Jeppe High School, while he attended the University of the Witwatersrand, and a series of stories published in the Johannesburg *Sunday Times*.

Craig MacKenzie's *The Oral-Style South African Short Story in English* (1999) places Bosman's narratives in context, and offers important perspectives on how socio-economic changes taking place in South Africa during the time Bosman wrote are reflected in his sketches. In addition, both Gray and MacKenzie have played integral roles in maintaining interest in Bosman's narratives by editing the Anniversary Edition of his work. Gray's (1999) edition of *Cold Stone Jug* contains fascinating details and photographs from Bosman's time in prison, while *Old Transvaal Stories* (1999), edited by MacKenzie, includes lesser-known narratives which demonstrate Bosman's experimentation with different narrative styles. In *Idle Talk: Voorkamer Stories (I)* (1999), MacKenzie takes narratives which have appeared in earlier volumes of Bosman's stories (*Jurie Steyn's Post Office* and *A Bekkersdal Marathon*, both 1971) and situates them, for the first time, in the sequence in which they were written. As he explains in the preface to *Idle Talk*, reading the narratives in their original order illustrates the modelling of Bosman's themes.

While these and other critics have provided crucial insights into Bosman's literary achievements, their criticism is by no means exhaustive. In his introduction to the 1986 collection of essays Gray credits Bosman with effecting a "reading revolution" in English-speaking South Africa by rejecting the trend which glorified foreign places and foreign literature, and focusing instead on the wealth of material South Africa, herself, could provide (p.30). Bosman's fiction was pivotal to the 'read South African' platform which gained momentum and challenged the perception that local was too parochial to be of any interest. While his insights into the importance of developing local literature played a significant role in the appreciation of this literature, more interesting is the fact that his fiction, written half a century ago, reflects current trends in literary appreciation and understanding. The popularisation of storytelling over the past few decades has gone hand-in-hand with the crisis situation of postmodernist

history. I go into the debate in some detail in Chapter Three; but briefly this crisis involves what can be summed up as the rejection of any total, definitive conception of truth. In essays which have had a significant effect on the way in which history and knowledge are perceived, Hayden White (1978) provides an argument for the fact that history, as we have understood it in the past, cannot have the methodological rigour nor the claim to 'truth' which we attribute to it because, in reality, it is nothing more than a form of narrative discourse. According to White, historiographers, in constructing a narrative account of the past, have had to provide a context in which to make disparate 'facts' meaningful, and in the construction of this context the of invention and imagination are unavoidably present.

While this debate altered not only perceptions of 'history' and 'truth' but of all forms of knowledge, it had the inevitable spin-off of attributing new status to the function of storytelling as a means of documenting a version of truth. Although Bosman's storytelling skills have been applauded by critics of his work, the value of the bushveld narratives in a socio-historical sense has largely been overlooked. Aside from the essay by Lawson in Gray's 1986 collection which analyses Bosman's depiction of racial conflict in South Africa, none of the critics engage with his fiction as a vital historical 'window' on pre-apartheid South Africa. Black Consciousness writing and 'white' anti-apartheid writing comprise important sociological probings into the effects of apartheid on society, but what this writing does not adequately do is record the ideologies of the white 'master race' in a way that sheds light on the origins of apartheid. What Bosman succeeds in doing so well, through his comic-ironic 'oral' storytelling style, is construct a record of the attitudes of a segment of South African society, attitudes which become concretised in apartheid, and which had a profound effect on the lives of all South African people. Through the ideologies of the farmers in the 'bushveld' stories Bosman provides a vital link in the recording of memory and the post-apartheid reconstruction of South African history. It is my argument, in this thesis, that Bosman's Groot Marico narratives comprise an important constituent of what is loosely called 'anti-apartheid writing' by virtue of their role as reminder of the not-very-distant past.

While there are number of Bosman biographies, the most exhaustively researched is one by Valerie Rosenberg, and I use this more than the others. Rosenberg's *Sunflower to the Sun* (1976) has been criticised by reviewers (most scathingly, Cherry Clayton for its "aggrandising" of Bosman, and for not focussing adequately on his literary achievements {Gray, 1986: 76}). However, on reading the other biographies (most notably by Bosman's friend, Aedigius Jean Blignaut), one gets the impression that Bosman's life was not easy to narrate. His eccentricity, changing opinions and penchant for inexplicable acts present a biographer with a difficult task. If at times Rosenberg romanticises Bosman's life, her attention to detail is nonetheless scrupulous.

In summary, the first chapter of *Dancing the Tiekiedraai* discusses some of the challenges faced by South African writers during the apartheid era by illustrating the way in which Afrikanerdom was mythologised in order to serve the interests of the small, white segment of the population. It discusses the advent of the *plaasroman*, and the role this *genre* played in institutionalising these myths by depicting the South African landscape as an empty one waiting to be colonised by a chosen people. This chapter serves to illustrate the appropriation of history through the subjective interpretation and recording of facts pertaining to the South Africa's socio-historic past, and the concept of storytelling is introduced as an antidote both to the pervasive nature of officially recorded historical text, and to the uninspired, journalistic style of much 'anti-apartheid' writing.

Chapter Two begins by discussing the post-apartheid 're-writing' of history through storytelling and the utilisation of individual memory in order to fill in history's 'black holes' – in other words, the silences which exist in relation to history recorded from a 'black' point of view. The chapter discusses the problems critics had in categorising Bosman, and argues that his depiction of the South African landscape in many ways negates the *plaasroman genre* formulated and developed by Bosman's contemporaries. It introduces the concept of Bosman as 'storytelling historian', arguing that his depiction of an aspect of South African society comprises a condemnation of segregationist thinking, and functions as an important 'window' on the foundations of apartheid.

The third chapter, 'Bosman the Storyteller', focuses in more detail on the narratives themselves, providing examples of Bosman's storytelling technique. This chapter analyses the 'clues' Bosman provides to understanding and interpreting the Groot Marico narratives, in the process illuminating some misrepresentative responses to this writer's fiction. It discusses the complexity of the character of Oom Schalk, and the way Bosman used this and other narrative techniques - irony, in particular - to impart a very particular socio-political message. My argument is that, instead of adding to history's 'black holes', Bosman's narratives are styled in such a way that they *create awareness of* silence. For the purposes of this thesis, which concentrates on the socio-historical value of Bosman's short fiction, my interest is in the bushveld stories rather than the novels or poems. A short biography provides a chronology of his work, but it is only the Groot Marico tales which get discussed. It is my aim, in analysing these stories in the context of contemporary literary thought and developments, to demonstrate that Bosman's narratives were not 'idle talk'², but an important representation of a segment of South African history.

2 From *Idle Talk: Voorkamer Stories (I)*, Craig MacKenzie (ed), 1999

Biography

Nothing, like something, happens anywhere

*Philip Larkin, 1954*³

In January 1926 a newly-graduated school-teacher named Herman Bosman got off a train from Johannesburg and surveyed the vast, scantily populated dust-bowl of the Groot Marico. The area, named after the Groot Marico river which runs along its eastern border, was settled by farmers who had come either to find fresh grazing for their cattle, or to seek new land away from British jurisdiction. Their dream was to build a home for themselves where they could live peacefully by rules of the own making; but the windless, cloudless bushveld did not bode well for farming, and the ethos of the small community was one of hardship and survival. The Marico magisterial district in the 1920s was bounded on the north and north-west by the Bechuanaland Protectorate (later, Botswana), and the eastern boundary runs southward from the Dwarsberg towards Lichtenburg. In the south-west, the Groot Marico area was divided from the Cape Province by a barbed-wire fence known as the 'Convention Line'. An average annual rainfall of around 400mm yielded a vast array of thorn trees – *apiesdoring*, *haak-en-steek*, *soetdoring*, *kameeldoring* – and water had to be pumped manually from boreholes located by water-diviners. The white people who had settled in this isolated district were mostly descendants of the Trekboers – merely a generation away from the Anglo-Boer wars, and within living memory of the massacre of Boers by chief Makapan and his warriors. The dour, humourless Calvinism practised by many of the farmers was a consequence of their forefather's rejection of the ideas of the European Enlightenment, and their religion was congruous with the rigours of eking out an existence in the hostile African bush.

It was the children of these farmers whom 21-year-old Bosman had come to teach. Heimweeberg school stood on the Haasbroek farm, a couple of kilometres from the Zwingli post office. Children who lived too far from Nietverdiend, which boasted the only other school in the area, rode on donkey-cart to the thatch-roofed shelter where they derived a rudimentary education. Tant Nellie Haasbroek, on whose family's land the Heimweeberg school stood, described Bosman as a "friendless man" (Goldblatt, 1993: 4). Despite a good relationship with the family whose home he lived in, Bosman was not readily accepted by the tightly welded Marico community who seem to have regarded him with suspicion and mistrust. Nellie Haasbroek's prophetic words to her husband, "he will end in the gallows," sums up the stern disapproval his rebellious nature must regularly have provoked. Just six months later this volatile and impulsive streak had him standing in the Johannesburg Supreme Court on the charge of shooting and killing his 23-year-old step-brother. His words to the judge on receiving

³ From 'I remember, I remember' in *Philip Larkin: Collected Poems*, 1986

the death-sentence are worth quoting for the insight they give into the character of a man whom friends and biographers have struggled to describe. He said,

My lord, in this strange world of laughter and sighs, I am in my predicament strengthened by the knowledge that there are those whom I love and who love me and who still have faith in me. In that tragic moment, the happenings of which are still not clear to me, I was impelled by some wild and chaotic impulse, in which there was no suggestion of malice or premeditation (Rosenburg, 1974: 55).

Nobody seems to have understood what happened that night. Bosman was with his family in Johannesburg for the holidays, and with him he'd brought the rifle he'd bought from Oom At Geel, chairman of the school committee back in the Groot Marico. Bosman came home one evening to find his brother and step-brother involved in a scuffle in the bedroom they shared. For reasons he, himself, could not explain, he fetched his loaded rifle and fired a fatal shot. On 15 November 1926 Bosman was sentenced to "be hanged by the neck until (he) be dead" (Gray, 1986 : 4). He never returned to the Groot Marico to complete his teaching post, and it's doubtful that the community was disappointed. But he returned again and again in his mind to the people he'd come to know, and whose values seemed as crude and simplistic as the homes they built in the bushveld. The sombre rigidity with which the Marico farmers viewed the world and conducted their lives captured the imagination of the young, impressionable Bosman who seemed as intrigued by them as he was critical of their attitudes. The six short months he spent living amongst the Marico boers gave him enough writing material to last many years, and it was due to that inauspicious period in his life that Bosman produced the proliferation of stories which were later described by William Plomer as "the best ever to come out of South Africa" (cover of *Mafeking Road*, 1991).

Herman Charles Bosman was born on 5 February 1905 in Kuils River, outside Cape Town, to Elisa Malan, a teacher, and Jacobus Malan, a mine-worker. The family moved to Krugersdorp and then to Potchefstroom, home of Elisa's family, where Herman and his younger brother attended Potchefstroom College. As Rosenberg (1974) explains, Potchefstroom in 1916 was still heavily influenced by the British: hotel names reflected reverence for the monarchy, and the upper echelons of society had their tea in English-style tea-rooms complete with waitresses uniformed in black aprons and caps. Elisa Malan's family was a prominent one in the town. Her brother, Charles Malan, was the founder-editor of *Die Westelike Stem*, a pro-South African Party newspaper. He was very friendly with General Smuts, and later became secretary of the South African Party for the Transvaal. Charles's brother, Fred, an advocate, was regarded as one of the most outstanding judges of the appeal court, and it was in the company of these men that Bosman's interest in philosophy and literature developed.

The relationship between Elisa Malan and her husband deteriorated, and there was open dissension between Herman and his father. As a simple, illiterate mine labourer, there was little Jacobus Malan could offer his wife and sons in terms of intellectual stimulation. Instead, his accomplished Uncle Charles was Herman's mentor and father-figure. In 1916 the Malan family moved to a single-storey house in Jeppestown, Johannesburg, and Herman was enrolled at Jeppe Central School where his notoriety as a trouble-maker outweighed his academic achievement. He contributed to the Jeppe High School Magazine, and along with a friend, collaborated in a writing stories for the Johannesburg *Sunday Times*. Rosenberg (1974) recounts an incident which sheds light on Bosman's scant regard for convention. During his matric examinations in 1922 Bosman couldn't understand his Algebra paper. Instead of simply giving up, he used the blank page to write a letter to the examiner explaining his deficiencies in the subject, and asking that this be overlooked on the grounds of his excellence in English. He repeated matric at Houghton College, and in 1923 (the year of his father's death), enrolled at the University of the Witwatersrand and the Normal College for teacher trainees to study for his T2 teaching diploma. He joined the Young Communist League, and in March he contributed an essay on Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* to the University of the Witwatersrand Student Magazine, where he noted the literary construction of the pilgrimage, and the way it was able to contain so many diverse and ironically depicted stories. As Rosenberg (1974) points out, it is highly likely that the *Tales* provided Bosman with the inspiration for the Groot Marico construct which later framed his own tales.

His mother Elisa remarried, this time to a Rhodesian named William Russell. Aside from two married children from a previous marriage, Russell had three adult children who moved in with their father, Elisa and her two sons, Herman and Pierre. The marriage was not an improvement on the first, and the two families lived disharmoniously together in their small house in Isipingo Street, Bellevue, Johannesburg. By the end of 1925 Bosman qualified as a teacher with a T2 diploma from the Transvaal Education Department, and in January 1926 he married a bank clerk by the name of Vera Sawyer at the Johannesburg Magistrate's Court. The marriage was never consummated, and was later annulled by Vera's family. Two days later Bosman left for his first teaching post in the one-roomed, Afrikaans-medium school near Zwingli in the Zeerust-Groot Marico district of the Transvaal. This period away was the source of most of the 170 short stories he was later to write. In "Marico Revisited" (*A Cask of Jerepigo*) Bosman writes,

Many of the farms north of the Dwarsberge had been occupied little more than ten years before by farmers who had trekked into the Marico from the Northern Cape and the Western Transvaal. The farmers were real Boers. I am told I have a deep insight into the character of the Afrikaner who lives his life on the platteland. I acquired this knowledge in the Marico, where I was sent when my mind was most open to impressions (Abrahams, 1990, p.524).

It was on the evening before his return to this bushveld that Bosman shot his step-brother. While the judge had little choice but to issue the death sentence, it was clear to all in the courtroom that this was no ordinary murder trial. The judge responded to Bosman's short speech by describing the trial as a "very sad and pathetic case," and expressing the wish that the sentence be commuted by the governor-general in favour of a "not lengthy" period of imprisonment (Gray, 1986: 4). Bosman was sent to Pretoria Central Prison. While he awaited execution in the 'condemned' cells, his family and friends worked hard to get him a reprieve. Advocate Fred Malan, his uncle, approached Tielman Roos, Minister of Justice, to intercede on Bosman's behalf, and his friends, Bernard Sachs and Fred Zwarenstein, drew up a petition urging leniency. His friends' efforts were not in vain – the following year Bosman was reprieved, and his sentence reduced to one of imprisonment with hard labour for ten years. Naturally, it was those long days which became months and years that inspired Bosman to write *Cold Stone Jug*, the "chronicle of (his) somewhat lengthy sojourn in prison" (Goldblatt, 1993: 1).

The Johannesburg-based *The Sjabok* was a satirical newspaper edited by Stephen Black. Over six issues this newspaper carried the serialised story of a convict called Lago Clifford, whose period of incarceration coincided with Herman Bosman's. In *The Sjabok*, Clifford describes a meeting with a fellow convict who can only have been Herman Bosman. He says,

The most interesting and intellectual man I met at the Central Prison was a young student – refined, creative, poetical. He is serving a sentence of ten years hard labour, having been convicted of murder and reprieved. He is a university man who had a brilliant scholastic career; is highly read and possesses a most fascinating personality. (...) Will not something be done to mitigate this unhappy fate and give back to this country a fine intellect? The poor young student I speak of is an Afrikander and educated wholly in South Africa. But he has no trace whatever of any colonial accent. His aspect is a bright and cheerful one; he has clear blue vital eyes. He was convicted of having shot and killed in an ungovernable fit of rage and jealousy. There was not any suggestion of premeditated crime. (...). The law recognised this when they reprieved him; but ten years is a cruel sentence. The young man has undoubtedly great literary gifts, some think genius. (Gray, 1986: 5).

In Bosman's fourth year in the Pretoria Central Prison he started writing petitions for remission of sentence on behalf of various prisoners, and he often succeeded in getting a prisoner's sentence reduced by half. Eventually, he attempted a petition on his own behalf, and was advised by the head warden that his sentence, too, had been halved. Through his own efforts, and the efforts of friends and family, Bosman ended up serving three years and nine months in jail. On 15 August 1930 he was released on parole. Bosman returned to Johannesburg and befriended a journalist by the name of Aedigius Jean Blignaut who had recently launched a literary monthly magazine called the *Touleier*. Blignaut was impressed by Bosman's writing, and his first major short story, "Makapan's Caves", appeared in the *Touleier*'s first volume. The mutual admiration between Blignaut and Bosman and the parallel nature of their interests and aspirations resulted in a close friendship. During the time of the

periodical's survival there appeared the first of the 'Oom Schalk Lourens' stories by Herman Malan, the name he was to write under for the next couple of years.

While he worked with Blignaut on the *Touleier*, Bosman continued to see his wife, but their relationship remained platonic. In the same year he met Ellie Beemer, Blignaut's secretary on the *Touleier*, and a romantic involvement began. Refined, educated Ellie proved a better intellectual and spiritual match for Bosman than Vera had been, and a series of passionate and erotically symbolic poems ensued. However, her wealthy Jewish family would not condone marriage to an ex-convict with an Afrikaans name, and their relationship had no future. In the January-February and March 1931 issues of the *Touleier*, Bosman's second major story, "The Rooinek", appeared in two parts. After five issues the *Touleier* was not generating enough income to stay afloat, and was taken over by African Publications who renamed the periodical *The African Magazine*. In March, Stephen Black's magazine, *The Sjabok*, ceased publication due to libel suits, and in August 1931 Black died bankrupt.

Bosman and Blignaut decided to found *The New Sjabok* and *The New L.S.D.*, named after Black's South African version of the British World War I magazine, *Life, Sport and Drama*. In May, Bosman's "The Ramoutsa Road" was published in the first volume of *The New L.S.D.* In July of the same year, *The New Sjabok* had 100 000 readers. Towards the end of 1931 Bosman published a pamphlet of poetry called *The Blue Princess* which he dedicated to Ellie Beemer. In the preface he arrogantly wrote,

The mob will not understand these verses. It would be an insult to me if they pretended they did. A little sane logical man understanding the mad glories of a poet with his head in the stars and his feet on the white sand. But here and there will be those whom God has purposefully made different from their fellows. They will understand; they will know what I mean by these things I have written, and I bless them with my hands (Gray, 1986: 8).

In 1932 Bosman and Blignaut appeared in the Johannesburg Magistrate's Court on charges of libel, crimen injuria, publishing obscene and objectionable material and of blasphemy concerning the publication of the poem 'Gardenias' in *The New L.S.D.* The offending verses contained references to God:

"Hold out your hands," God said, "here are a few loose jewels I didn't want to waste by making stars out of."
 "But they are my jewels, God," I said, "I don't know where you got them from."
 God sighed. "Ah well, I must have been drunk again," God said.
 (Rosenberg, 1974 : 106).

Bosman was fined 25 Pounds or three months' hard labour, and Blignaut, 75 Pounds or eight months' hard labour. Neither had any money, so they had to go to prison.

In 1933 Blignaut started another periodical called the *Ringhals* which was advertised as “the paper that is not afraid” (Rosenburg, 1974: 109). Almost immediately Bosman and Blignaut were in trouble with the law again, this time for publishing ‘indecent material’ in the form of an erotic story by Bosman called “Nun’s Passion – a Christmas Story.” The case was heard and postponed many times. At the final hearing the presiding magistrate declared the story “not fit for any person to read” (Rosenburg, 1974: 109). 1932 was also the year in which Bosman remarried, this time to Ellaleen Manson, a gifted pianist and sister to playwright H.W.D. Manson. In 1934 Ellaleen and Herman left South Africa for London where they spent six and a half years. As Rosenberg (1974) testifies, there are very few traces of this period abroad, and these years are largely considered ‘lost’ (Gray, 1986: 9).

In November 1934, after Bosman had been living in London for a year, his old school friend Bernard Sachs launched a magazine called the *South African Opinion* which became one of the most significant Johannesburg periodicals of the time. The second issue of the *Opinion* contained four contributions by Bosman – a short story and three poems published under different pseudonyms. The short story was “Veld Maiden”, one of Bosman’s better-known narratives. As Rosenberg (1974) testifies, almost every issue of the *Opinion* contained a new ‘Schalk Lourens’ story: “Yellow Moepels”, “Love Potion”, “In the Withaak’s Shade”, “The Widow”, “Willem Prinsloo’s Peach Brandy”, “Ox-wagons on the Trek”, “The Music-maker”, “Drieka and the Moon”, “Mafeking Road”, “Marico Scandal” and “Bechuana Interlude”, and this time the stories were ascribed to H.C. Bosman. Certainly the stories Bosman wrote during his self-imposed exile from South Africa were among his best.

In 1940, shortly after the outbreak of the second world war, Bosman and his wife returned to a changed South Africa. As Rosenberg (1974) explains,

Everything was being geared towards the war effort. Austerity was tightening its grip over the land and its peoples. Newsprint was being severely rationed, and newspapers had to make do with what they had. Jobs in journalism were hard to come by, and conditions did not allow for such luxuries as the *Touleier* or the *New L.S.D.* of the pre-war years (p.134).

Like many professionals in South Africa, Bosman was forced to perform menial jobs to pay the rent, while writing a disparate collection of art reviews and articles. In 1943 he was appointed editor of the *Zoutpansberg Review and Mining Journal*, a United Party-orientated bi-weekly newspaper, and he and Ellaleen moved to Pietersburg for Bosman to take up the post. In Rosenberg’s (1974) words,

Hapless farmers and businessmen, accustomed to pedestrian discussions in their paper on traffic lights, farm prices and new industries, were suddenly confronted with the peculiar lunacies of a poet in their midst (p.140).

The atmosphere in Pietersburg in 1943 was one of insurrection against the English, and outrage by Afrikaners at South African participation in the war. Many of Pietersburg's inhabitants were members of the Ossewa-Brandwag, a society which both opposed fighting on the side of the British, and served to reinforce the national identity of Afrikaners. By contrast, the *Review* encouraged the war effort, and published articles on topics such as the importance of opposing anti-Semitism, which confounded the town's inhabitants. The following passage, written by Bosman, hints at the fact that the inhabitants of Pietersburg reminded him of the farmers of the Marico. He wrote,

They were strongly attached to the Bible and to their church. They were potential schizophrenics through generations of trying to adapt the rigid tenets of their Calvinist creed to the spacious demands made by life on the Afrikaans veld. There was the veld and there was John Calvin. And the Voortrekkers assumed without enquiry that the truths the veld taught them of life were one of the rigidities of sectarian doctrine, as embodied in the more starless conceptions of predestination and original sin. The spirit of the veld was large. Calvin's was not so large (Rosenberg, p.147).

This passage contains some of the sentiments which later expressed themselves in the bushveld stories – the blind acceptance of conformism which troubled and intrigued Bosman, and the contrast of what he regarded as small-mindedness compared with the untameable nature of the African bush. But if the Groot Marico which existed in Bosman's mind provided such a wealth of imaginative material, the proximity of the inhabitants and the cloistered environment of the dorp of Pietersburg hampered his creativity. During his editorship of the *Review*, Bosman suffered a period of writer's block which coincided, significantly, with the dissolution of his marriage. In 1944 he divorced again, and after a series of relationships, married a Pietersburg school-teacher by the name of Helena Stegmann. Prior to their marriage, a scandal during which Bosman was prosecuted for performing an abortion on Helena resulted in their residency in Pietersburg becoming untenable. He was asked to resign from his job, and in the same year became literary editor of the revived *South African Opinion*.

The *Opinion* was brought to life by Bernard Sachs and Leon Feldberg during an important time in South African literature and art. As Rosenberg (1974) explains, there was a soaring renewal in Afrikaans literature, particularly the poetry of the 'Dertigers' – N.P. van Wyk Louw, Uys Krige, W.E.G. Louw and others. During this period Bosman's interest in the poetry of the period revived his interest in the Afrikaans language, and provided the vehicle for what he saw as the unfolding of an indigenous South African culture. It was during this time that Bosman developed his views on the importance of South African literature retaining the uniqueness of the South African experience, instead of vying for acceptance overseas. Inspired by the burgeoning of local art, he wrote

The essential soul of a culture is that it must be indigenous. (...) The place for South African literature to take root is here. Here in Johannesburg. Here in South Africa. It must grow up from the granite of our pavements. From the sun-stricken soul of our

veld. From either or from both: it doesn't matter which. It must be created here. It must be born here out of the minds and the blood of our writers. (...) It is here that our writers must find appreciation and understanding. (...) The era of the quasi-European culture has ended. (Gray, 1986: 88).

The most prolific period of Bosman's writing career followed. In the next seven years he wrote 30 bushveld stories, a number of other short stories and conversation pieces, three novels and a copious amount of journalism. *Jacaranda in the Night*, Bosman's first novel, was published in 1947. It's the story of a typical South African *dorp*, and was no doubt inspired by his time in Pietersburg. The town in *Jacaranda* is called 'Kalwyn', an obvious allusion to the Calvinism practised by Pietersburg's inhabitants. A disagreement with a senior colleague on the *Opinion* resulted in Bosman's resigning and becoming involved in a project called the *Afrikaanse Kulturele Leserskring* which translated some of the classics into Afrikaans. The project was not successful, a setback which coincided with Bosman's failing health. He and Helena left Cape Town and moved back to Johannesburg where, later that year, he completed *Mafeking Road*, a collection of 'Oom Schalk Lourens' stories. One of the most reputed reviewers in South Africa at that time, Mary Morison Webster, worked for the *Sunday Times*. Of *Mafeking Road* she wrote,

One of the best things to have happened in South Africa for many a day is the publication of *Mafeking Road* by Herman Charles Bosman. (...) In *Mafeking Road* the suspicion that his contribution to South African literature may be significant is... confirmed. Here is a collection of short-stories of the first-water – a collection so rich in human interest, historical matter and poetic fancy that it compares more than favourably with any other national collection of our time (Rosenberg, 1974: 196).

The review in the *Rand Daily Mail* read,

Here are twenty-one short stories, eighteen of which are perfect of their kind, flowing effortlessly from a root of genius that cannot be gainsaid (Rosenberg, 1974 : 197).

Mafeking Road both established Bosman's reputation as a writer in South Africa, and also elicited a good response from overseas. But Bosman and Helena remained financially impoverished, and for a relatively long period after returning to Johannesburg, their home was a single room at the Sydney Hotel. Along with failing health, Bosman began having nightmares about the time he spent in prison. As a means of exorcising his emotional demons, Bosman began writing *Cold Stone Jug*. He completed it in the cramped quarters of their hotel room, and while its reviews were not as good as those for *Mafeking Road*, it was nonetheless regarded as an important book. The *Rand Daily Mail* said,

Bosman has an extraordinarily interesting story to tell at times; when his mood of wry detachment and the casual way in which he writes are suited to his subject matter, he tells it vividly and with insight. Some of his descriptions, stark and sharply done, make one shudder and fill one with a terrible sense of desolation. The characters are cleverly

and accurately drawn, and the prison argot in which they talk is very well handled. As a writer Mr Bosman has fine qualities which are not absent from *Cold Stone Jug*; he has a trueness of ear, trueness of eye and insight into human experience. (Rosenberg, 1974 : 200).

Cold Stone Jug was a commercial success, and sold out shortly after its appearance. In 1950 Bosman started writing the 'Voorkamer' series of bushveld stories for *The Forum* at a pace of one per week. He had revisited the Groot Marico to find the area changed by technological progress, and the Voorkamer 'conversation pieces' reflect these changes. Where the 'Oom Schalk' stories emphasise survival in the bushveld, the Voorkamer stories are more centred on the art of conversation and the significance of storytelling. Bosman's health continued to trouble him, and a succession of near heart-attacks made him realise that it was time to sort out his priorities. He wanted to write another book, and to this end took on a job as a proof-reader in order to conserve his creative energies. His major work during this time was a novel titled *Willemsdorp*, set again in Pietersburg. Previously he had attempted to write a novel set in Johannesburg, but had abandoned his efforts on the grounds that he understood *dorp* life better. After a false start whereby he discarded the first 165 pages of the novel and started again, *Willemsdorp* was finished. While it was considered, by critics, to be better than *Jacaranda in the Night*, the un-Bosman-like ending had critics wondering whether it was, in fact, completed by the time of Bosman's death. Sadly, *Willemsdorp* was not published in Bosman's lifetime, but only twenty-six years later in 1977. This novel was to be his last major work. The day after a party attended by the most significant people in his life, Herman Charles Bosman suffered a fatal heart-attack. The date was 14 October 1951.

Chapter One: Prison Writing and Ideological Censorship

There is a game going on between the covers of the book, but it is not always the game you think it is
(J.M. Coetzee, 1989)^{2a}

In “History and the South African Writer” (1991) Susan Gallagher discusses the unique, complex and often impossible conundrum faced by South African writers under the apartheid system. As Gallagher (1991) points out, the way in which literary works have been received has been strongly influenced by the degree to which they were seen to challenge, oppose or simply expose apartheid’s massive-scale inhumanity. White and black writers alike have been obliged to use their art as a weapon of social change, and also against the forms of censorship^{2b} imposed by the South African state. This task has been further complicated by the physical separation of different groups of people, a situation which has resulted largely in the perception of ‘otherness’ which predominates in South African language and thought. The white writer who sought to assist in the struggle against apartheid was made painfully aware of his or her inability to speak authoritatively about black oppression and exploitation. Instead, as Philip Toynbee explains, these writers made it their task to raise the consciousness of other white people who, unlike themselves, had not woken up to the social realities of apartheid. More than this, they could not do without employing a dangerous presumptuousness (Gallagher, 1991).

The black writer, on the other hand, faced the daunting task of being a spokesperson for the silent masses. S/he had to speak for those whom apartheid had rendered voiceless, and writing for art’s sake during a time of social urgency invited accusations, as André Brink (1998) explains, of self-indulgence and avoiding reality; of “fiddling while Rome burns” (p. 15). Says Richard Rive,

the writer who cannot vote, who carries a pass and who lives in a ghetto must necessarily write qualitatively differently from the writer who can vote, does not carry a pass and lives wherever he pleases (Gallagher, 1991: 5).

Similarly, in his foreword to a novel by Alex la Guma, Brian Bunting writes,

It is difficult to propound the cult of ‘art for art’s sake’ in South Africa. Life presents problems with an insistence which cannot be ignored, and there can be few countries in the world where people, of all races and classes, are deeply preoccupied with matters generally falling under the heading of ‘political’. If art is to have any signifi-

^{2a} From Dick Penner’s *Countries of the Mind: the Novels of J.M. Coetzee*, p.134

^{2b} By ‘censorship’ I refer both to the legislated kind which I discuss in a footnote on p.29, as well as the censorship which is a result of the ‘otherness’ referred to in the paragraph. It is this psychic separation which restricts black and white writers to the parameters of their personal experience. In other words, with very few exceptions, white writers write ‘white’ writing, and black writers write ‘black’.

cance at all, it must reflect something of the national obsession, this passion which consumes and sometimes corrodes the soul of the South African people (Gallagher, 1991: 5).

While white writers felt ethically compelled to use art to respond to apartheid's injustices, most black authors saw the political dimension of literature as inescapable (Gallagher, 1991).

South African literature has had to fight for prominence with the pervasive narrative of socio-political struggle which has complicated and dictated the role of the artist. J.M. Coetzee describes the writing produced in South Africa as

a less than fully human literature, unnaturally preoccupied with power and torsions of power, unable to move from elementary relations of contestation, domination and subjugation to the vast and complex human world that lies beyond them (Attwell, 1992: 98).

Alongside this obsession with domination and subordination are levels of silence, explains André Brink (1998). During apartheid, certain experiences were 'out of bounds' to words, both because of their indescribable horror and because of the banning and censorship laws which made writing 'reality' difficult on a practical level. But these bannings were only the superficial, visible signs of enormous territories of historical consciousness silenced for hundreds of years by the power establishment. As Brink (1998) explains, these included justification for white ownership of the land, the creation of myths regarding Afrikaner identity, and down-playing the extent of miscegenation between Afrikaners and their slaves. Within this type of context, all writing gets scrutinised for what has been said and what has been left out, and the primary question is not, 'how does this book fare as a literary achievement?' but rather, 'how does this book fit into the political struggle?' It is these circumstances affecting black and white writers alike which prompted J.M. Coetzee to describe South African literature as "exactly the kind of literature one would be expected to write from a prison" (Coetzee, 1992: 98).

The politicisation of art in South Africa has gone hand-in-hand with the fictionalisation of the past. The mythologising of Afrikanerdom and segments of the South African past (which I shall explain in some detail further on in the chapter) formed an integral part of keeping power in the hands of the white minority. The silences which exist in South African history, and the biased nature of recordings of white, historical 'truth', have created a situation where contemporary writers are obliged to pursue a narrative mode which challenges existing conceptions of the past. Hayden White's (1978) analysis of the problems inherent in conventional historiography are of particular relevance to the situation in present-day South Africa. To sum up White's argument, he explains that the twentieth century has

witnessed a significant deconstruction of what was formerly accepted as 'historical knowledge' or 'historical consciousness', the latter being increasingly seen as a specifically Western prejudice which presumed the superiority of modern, industrialised society (White, 1978: 3). According to White (1978), it is a major problem to mistake the narrative form in which historians construct the past as being the past itself, since historiography cannot represent the past in an unmediated way. White argues that the problem with traditional historiography is that, in order to give disparate facts meaning, they would have to be transmuted into narrative form; in other words, historiographers had to provide a background or context to events of the past in order to give them meaning, structure and chronology. In addition to this inclination to narrativise the past is the element of ideological standpoint which influences the way in which 'facts' are recorded. No construction of the past can ever be entirely neutral since it is within a particular paradigm that these facts are interpreted and rendered meaningful. The ideology of the historiographer must influence, for example, those elements of the past which are given prominence and those which are overlooked.

While White's argument, by implication, gives enormous status to the function of the narrative, a major shortcoming as cited by Jenkins (1995) is the fact that it denies "the material existence of the past (and) the present" (p.29). This theory both denies the ability of language to represent reality, and contravenes the fact that there is a world 'out there' which exists now, existed in the past, and which would be there irrespective of whether it was recorded historiographically or not. As White himself has argued (Jenkins, 1995), there is no distinctively 'historical' method of encapsulating 'history'; there is nothing which exists 'outside' the text which could be an antidote to the problems of textuality. Thus, the merit in White's problem with history and text being used synonymously is that it draws attention to the fact that no methodological approach can claim to directly access 'reality.'

According to White's theory which asks *whose* history is it that is getting told, earlier conceptions of history as 'the' story of the past have to make way for a multiplicity of stories – 'facts' interpreted against a diversity of ideological backgrounds, and which render a plethora of interpretations. This postmodernist view of history is interesting when applied to the South African context which saw a very specific version of history – the one which promoted and justified apartheid – being posited over other 'invisible' histories. Obviously, the 'hidden' and 'invisible' histories were those of the unenfranchised, disempowered non-white South Africans, a segment of whom responded to their lack of political and historical representation with a large-scale attempt at recording South African history from a 'black' point of view. The Black Consciousness movement, which gained momentum in the 1970s, fulfilled the important function of challenging South Africa's racist political structure and discriminatory social system by making black experience visible, albeit to a particular segment of the population.

While Black Consciousness writing made vital inroads into representing an alternative version of history, its (perhaps inevitable) shortcoming was its inability to present anything which resembled a totality of black, or South African, experience. In an essay titled "Authorship, Authenticity and the Black Community : The Novels of Soweto 1976", Kelwyn Sole (1991) discusses the short-comings of using 'story' and 'history' synonymously due, firstly, to their different methods, and secondly, to the effects of ideology and agenda on writing. While Sole (1991) credits Mongane Serote, Mbulelo Mzamane and Sipho Sepamla, amongst others, for the important role these writers played in documenting a 'black' version of political and social life in South Africa, he points out important factors which these novels overlook and which illuminate the fact that, while parallels can be drawn between history and realist fiction, they remain different disciplines.

One of the problems of Black Consciousness writing is that, to a large extent, it excluded the working class whom it assumed to represent, and ignored important questions of democracy and leadership which remain relevant in present-day South Africa (Sole, 1991). If white South Africans are stereotypically depicted as promoters of the apartheid system, or privileged, uncommitted white liberals, working-class black South Africans are largely dismissed. Nonetheless, the novels purport to speak for 'the people'; to mobilise and educate the ignorant, unpoliticised masses against South Africa's racist ideology. There is an assumption amongst Black Consciousness writers that there is a single and authentic version of truth which exists in opposition to the version posited by white politicians (Sole, 1991). Furthermore, many black writers of the seventies and eighties believed it was their responsibility to impart this truth to the black, unconscientised masses.

In light of White's (1978) theory on the role played by ideology and agenda in any recording of 'truth', this supposition has serious shortcomings. Firstly, as Sole (1991) argues, Black Consciousness writers perceived no distance between themselves as intellectual leaders and the masses whom they sought to politicise. Black people in South Africa are presented, in these novels, as a homogeneous group of people unified by the same interests and a common political goal. The novels, as Sole (1991) points out, do not accommodate disparities of class within the black community, nor the social and political diversification of people lumped together under the rubric 'black'. Secondly, there are significant silences and exclusions in the novels as white people are type-cast or ignored, black 'dissidents' (informers, policemen, community counsellors) marginalised, and particular social incidents given precedence over others (Sole, 1991). Finally, the 'ordinary' black working-class person is presented stereotypically as underpoliticised, susceptible to white propaganda, and waiting to be led to power by naturalised black leaders, while the strategies to gain political leadership are seen as "already in place and obvious" (Sole, 1991 : 14).

What these factors indicate is the danger in overlooking the political, ideological slant any form of fiction must take, and the fact that realist literature is no less susceptible to being skewed by the standpoint of the writer. While the novels do succeed in countering and negating white versions of black history, it is simplistic to expect them to accurately reflect the events of 1976.

In the same essay Sole discusses the difference, as he sees it, between history and story. He says,

As disciplines, history and literature contain differences of expectations, codes, conventions and methodology. History is generally more concerned with validation in its method of enquiry; it needs to be adequate to the material researched and presented, while creative literature can in some instances simply concern itself with an approximation and symbolic appropriation of social detail (Sole, 1991: 21).

While literature does not have the same reference to paradigm as history does, it functions, as Sole (1991) explains, through “metaphorical, symbolic and allusive procedures” (p.22), and in so doing has the ability to

...penetrate into psychological processes, and lay bare motivations, responses and desires in a way history has only been able to by reference to cultural determinants and subjective elements. (...) The allusive nature of literature can in certain circumstances probe more into the heart of things than sociological or historical studies (Sole, 1991: 22).

This quote constitutes the focal-point of the story-history debate. It is necessary at this point to return to how white South African writers have responded to the crisis of postmodernist history; more specifically, to the silences in South African historical text, and to embark on an in-depth discussion of how these silences were instituted and how the myths were made. As I argued earlier in the chapter, the questions of agenda and ideology, and the biased nature of recordings of white, historical ‘truth’, have had a profound effect on the literature which has been produced, and many contemporary writers have been obliged to pursue a narrative mode which challenges existing conceptions of the past. A good example of writing which can be said to comprise a response to South African history’s silences is the fiction of J.M. Coetzee which Stephen Watson describes as “floating free of time and place, even in the act of alluding to a time and place specifically South African” (Huggan, 1996: 18). As Valdez (1998) explains,

There is a deliberate unsettledness in Coetzee, which deconstructs rather than assimilates to, any South African ‘sense of place.’ (...) He refuses to settle in a space that is conventionally and ideologically given (p.38).

The awareness by Coetzee of the ‘colonisation’ of history by white historiographers is reflected in his unwillingness to colonise a particular fictional genre. Coetzee utilises pastoral narratives (*In the Heart of the Country*) and narratives of exploration (*Dusklands*), but he cannot commit himself wholly to a

single narrative mode without running the risk of producing what he calls (in an essay on Beckett) “the daydream gratification of fiction” (Barnard, 1994: 43). This “daydream” constitutes the white (wo)man’s dream about a land which is empty and vast and waiting to be claimed. As Barnard (1998) explains, this “dream” bears an uncomfortable resemblance to the writings of official historiographers who stated that the land settled by the Voortrekker pioneers in the nineteenth century was open and unpeopled. It’s the conscious denial of truth – that South African history is not merely one of settlement, but one of displacement – that abounds in most South African writing.

As Coetzee argues in an essay titled “Farm Novel and Plaasroman” (1988), in the years spanning the 1920s to 1940s, a literary genre emerged in Afrikaans-language literature which had a single aim: to promote the Afrikaner and legitimatise his claim to the land. This literary genre was an important component of the movement loosely called ‘verafrikaansing’ (literally, ‘Afrikaans-cising’), and its aim was the establishment and concretisation of myths surrounding Afrikaner ethnic identity. It has had profound and far-reaching effects on South African history and politics, and a study of literature written by Herman Charles Bosman in the 1940s and 1950s requires a fairly comprehensive analysis of the events which fuelled a tribalist paradigm and led to the adoption of apartheid. Establishing Afrikanerdom and the historical and cultural identity of the settlers who landed in the Cape in the seventeenth century was not, by any means, a natural move towards national unity; on the contrary, it was a highly politicised strategy designed to safeguard the interests of a particular segment of South African society at a crucial stage in twentieth-century history.

A significant facet of the effect of apartheid on South African literature is the way in which language and mythology were manipulated by particular individuals to support the interests of Afrikaners. The success of what can be called a campaign to unify people whose only real common denominator was a mistrust and hatred for the English is intriguing, and can perhaps best be understood in terms of the human need for belonging, and for pride in one’s historical past.

Afrikaner nationalism is a movement whose origins are traced to the years immediately preceding the Second Anglo-Boer war, a war which humiliated and angered the defeated Boers. As Hexham (1981) points out, it was not the inevitable theo-political development of the Calvinist tradition, but innovations created by the Dopper community who saw themselves as a persecuted people, and, as Hexham explains, this mythologising succeeded because various Afrikaners adopted and entrenched it in the constitution of the National Party in 1914. In order to understand how these myths originated and gained currency amongst the Boers it is necessary to look briefly at the origins of the Great Trek, and how this movement by approximately ten thousand people into the South African interior fuelled and reinforced the burgeoning perception of Afrikaners as a distinct and chosen people. While there is disagreement amongst authors as to the exact reasons for the Great Trek (Hexham, 1981), it is

generally accepted that the onset of the exodus northward coincided with the British abolition of slavery at the Cape. British missionaries working mainly with the 'coloured' and African population were offended by the cruel and inhumane way the Boers treated their non-white slaves and neighbours, and complained to the authorities in England who put pressure on British administration in the Cape to establish justice on the frontier.

Attempts by British officials to apply the law equally to South Africans irrespective of race and social class angered the frontier farmers. It was decided by the British to emancipate the slaves which represented the major capital investment of many small farmers. The transition to freedom was supposed to be eased by an apprenticeship scheme, which meant that the slaves would remain under the control of their masters until 1838, after which the farmers would receive compensation, and the slaves would be free to move wherever they wished. Before this could take place, frontier farmers packed their belongings into covered wagons and migrated with their herds across the Orange River and up into the highveld to areas where the British claimed no jurisdiction. To quote Hexham (1981),

One Trek leader, Piet Retief, explained the migration as the need to "establish proper relations between master and servant." Later Afrikaner historians have stressed the oppressive nature of British rule, the lack of law and order on the frontier, and a policy of anglicization of Afrikaner children through English language schools. For them, the desire of the farmers to maintain their own language and religion became the prime cause of the Trek (p.10).

The Great Trek started in 1835, and it was a very important component in the mythologising of Afrikanerdom. Writers and historians were later able to canonise Trekker leaders such as Piet Retief as heroes in the Afrikaner's quest for independence, and they compared the migration of the Boers to the Old Testament's Israelites who fled Canaan in search of the holy land, conquering heathens along the way. Afrikaans linguist Gustav Preller's work on Piet Retief which commenced in 1905 and became what Isabel Hofmeyr calls a 'Voortrekker industry' (1984: 27), was instrumental to the forging of Afrikaner history. But in fact, historical evidence suggests that the north-bound Trekkers were by no means as unified nor singular in their purpose as the architects of apartheid later suggested. 'Voortrekker' and 'Great Trek' are in fact terms which only entered the Afrikaner vocabulary in the 1880s. As late as 1910 people still called these migrant farmers 'emigrante' (emigrants) or 'verhuisers' (movers). In the building of an Afrikaner ethnic identity, writers took liberties fictionalising the Trek, "stitching together an 'Afrikaner' history which could become a myth of national origin" (Hofmeyr, 1984: 27).

There are many reasons why the Great Trek needed to be mythologised, but essentially it was due to socio-historical changes in South Africa which threatened the identity of the Afrikaner. The discovery of gold on the rand changed Johannesburg from a shanty town into a sprawling city, and as happens in

any proto-industrial situation, the structure of the rural Boer household began to change: families sent their daughters to the cities where they could remit their wages to the household economy, a situation which jeopardised the authority of the male head of the farm (Hofmeyr, 1984). These changes within the 'huisgesin' coincided with an onslaught of British imperialism as the newly discovered gold fields reawakened British interest in South Africa, further threatening the Boer's right to the land.

After losing the Anglo-Boer war, the morale of the Afrikaner was low. In the world war of 1914 sections of Afrikaner society rebelled against fighting on the side of the British and were penalised by having to pay fines. The 'Helpmekaar' movement was established to help the rebels pay their fines, thereby giving individuals concrete benefits for having behaved like Afrikaners. As Hofmeyr (1984) explains, it was in this atmosphere of insurrection against the English that there was an increasingly sharp definition of what it meant to be an Afrikaner. Prior to that time, Dutch was the official language at the Cape. The Afrikaans-speaking *petit bourgeoisie* began to press their claims for Afrikaans to be established as a language of its own, with its own literature and grammatical rules. As Hexham (1981) explains, the establishment of the Afrikaans language was inextricably tied to the creation of the political myths which led to the adoption of apartheid. In other words, the creators of apartheid had the enormous advantage of creating the written language in which the myths were enshrined.

Afrikaner intellectuals such as poet Jan Celliers used a variety of techniques to create such a literature. As Hofmeyr (1984) explains, they got established writers to write in Afrikaans, and they instituted literary competitions and prizes which overtly or subtly encouraged people to write about 'Afrikaans' subjects. This writing constituted the building blocks from which a common sense of identity could be constructed and, as Hofmeyr explains, the most significant point about the development of Afrikanerdom was its artifice. Part of the work was done in literature and historical writings, but most of it was done in reading circles, debating societies, drama associations, schools and columns in Afrikaans magazines. 'Die Brandwag' and 'Die Huisgenoot' carried articles, advertisements, pictures and stories which took virtually anything and repackaged it as 'Afrikaans', for example, food, architecture, etiquette, dress, health, humour and interior design (Hofmeyr, 1984).

In the 1910s and 1920s there was a mounting barrage of material addressing itself to women, prompting mothers to teach their children about their Afrikaner identity, and magazines like 'Die Boervrou' attempted to dignify and professionalise the domestic sphere in the face of the demise of the family under industrialisation. Literature presented a view of a struggling, proud and ultimately strong race of people succeeding in their battle against the black barbarians, on the one hand, and the English overlords on the other. The premise which was established was that a complete recovery from the effects of the war could only be achieved through God, and through recalling all Afrikaner people to the faith of their forefathers. As Hexham (1981) explains, religion and nationalism merged as an

educational theory which prided itself on its devotion to tradition. Modern theories of education were rejected, and Christian-national education became a symbol of the struggle of Afrikaners to preserve their language and traditions against the anglicising attempts of the British. Christian-national education emphasised the separate nature of the Afrikaner people: they were Calvinists with a duty to retain their nationalism.

These early educational concerns politically incarnated the myth of apartheid. Other peoples, black or white, had developed on the basis of different principles and must be left to their own development, while Afrikaners must preserve their Christian-national heritage by keeping themselves apart as a separate, unique group. By rejecting interracial marriages, the reformed church believed itself to be upholding the basic moral standards of the Afrikaner community. It was precisely out of their established religious customs that the practice of apartheid as a political reality emerged. What was emphasised was the 'apartness' of the Afrikaners, a myth which became entrenched in the collective consciousness of the Afrikaans people. By the time the term 'apartheid' became part of the lingua franca in 1943 in a speech by nationalist politician and subsequent prime minister D.F. Malan, the concept of separateness was firmly entrenched in the minds of most Afrikaans-speaking South Africans. According to Malan, the aim was to "ensure the safety of the white race, and of Christian civilisation, by the maintenance of the principles of apartheid and guardianship" (Hexham, 1984: 188). Within this context, the political and legal enforcement of strict racial segregation within South Africa was a small and logical step.

In order to maintain the myth of God-ordained land ownership, Afrikaans writers of the years 1920 to 1940 started evolving a curious and very significant literary genre which became known as the *plaasroman*, and which was less the spontaneous written product of a folk culture than the self-conscious fabrication of a group it intended to create (Coetzee, 1998). While the *plaasroman* was less a conscious, functional literary development than a response amongst intellectuals to the social changes happening within Afrikaner society, the genre was nonetheless instrumental in the forging of a separate Afrikaner identity. As J.M. Coetzee (1988) explains, the system of inheritance amongst farmers at the end of the nineteenth century whereby each son got an equal share of the father's farm led to inheritances too small for the farms to be economically viable. This problem was made more acute in the 1930s by years of poor rainfall, low wool prices and general economic depression (Coetzee, 1988). Afrikaans novelists responded by celebrating the old rural values which were being threatened by changes within South African society. To quote Coetzee,

In the literature of the period we see, not surprisingly, efforts to dignify the disasters by claiming for the old dispensation an antiquity losing itself in the mists of time. We also see efforts to buttress Afrikaner patriarchalism in order that a heightened significance should be attached to the acts of the founding fathers, to maintaining their legacy and

perpetuating their values (1988: 83).

These narratives styled themselves as reflections of the mythical *volk*, inventing an idealised, patriarchal past with legacies and values to be upheld by future generations. Led by prolific Afrikaans author C.M. van den Heever, a close look at the similarities between these fiction works indicates that the farm novelists were more interested in transforming than preserving the values and lifestyles of their forebears. The farm's meticulously defined social hierarchy is probably the most notable feature of novels belonging to the *plaasroman*: from God at the top of the Divine order followed by the farm, the farmer, his wife, children, servants and finally beasts, this finely construed social order was sanctioned by selective scripts taken from the Bible's Old Testament, and used to safeguard the farmer's position as ruler of his kingdom. The farmer's relationship to his land is described, in these novels, in terms reminiscent of a marriage – loyalty, respect, dedication and commitment are recurring concepts, and the relationship of farmer to farm is given predominance over all else.

The particular and telling omissions in the *plaasroman* novels indicate that this mythical husbandry had less to do with physical survival than the survival of a fantasy of ownership. As Coetzee (1998) explains, in his relationship to the land the farmer becomes part of a larger social system – the insulated 'family nation' of which men (and women, by implication) are part of a community of interlocking families with the common purpose of furthering the *volk*. Ties of blood are seen to connect family, nation and God, and by conceiving of the nation as a pure-blooded family there is no need to mention those who are not kin. Hence, the strange phenomenon in *plaasroman* novels of an Africa without Africans. Instead, limitless plains and bountiful nature take the place of social commentary, and these exist as a deliberate disacknowledgement of the dispossession of land.

In an attempt to address the silences which abound in *plaasroman* writing, Coetzee uses the literary genre of the *plaasroman* to challenge the conventional South African farm novel, and his unconventional employment of the *plaasroman* genre has interesting parallels with what an earlier writer, Herman Charles Bosman, achieved but was not credited for. While there are significant differences between the literary achievements of Bosman and Coetzee, it can be argued that an analysis of each writer's fictional depiction of the South African farm reveals similarities in their treatment of the land as microscopic South Africa. *In the Heart of the Country* (1976) is set on the same limitless plains as the *plaasroman* novels, but Coetzee's farmhouse is more fantastical even than the farmhouses of the traditional *plaasroman* writers describe. Instead of simply removing anyone non-white off the horizon, Coetzee dares his readers to believe a story where donkey-carts as the chief mode of transport exist simultaneously with aeroplanes, where details are vague and contradictory, and where the narrator 'forgets' facts and admits to embroidering. Through *In the Heart of the Country*'s unstable narrator, Magda, Coetzee illuminates the unstable and untrustworthy nature of the

historical context on which the (mostly white) South African consciousness is based. Madga lives on the farm and institutes its rules, but does not own it. When the social order is turned upside-down by her father's relationship with a 'coloured' servant and Magda's concomitant relationship with the servant's husband, her rightful position as heiress to the land is called into question. Thus, Madga is clearly a metaphor for the coloniser, and the farm a microcosm of South African society.

Herman Charles Bosman wrote in the thirties and forties when the 'verafrikaansing' movement was in its prime. His stories were (and are) principally enjoyed as social realism packaged in the form of amusing anecdotes. My argument, in this thesis, is that Bosman achieved much more than this. Even a superficial reading of one of his Groot Marico tales reveals significant differences from the *plaasroman* writing of his time, and these differences position him closely to contemporary theories of South African literature for two main reasons: his form of storytelling echoes what Njabulo Ndebele posits in 'Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction' (1991) as a possible direction for black South African writing to take, and relatedly, it uses a genre which is accessible and familiar to its audience to convey a political message which was less familiar and definitely not popular amongst the majority of white South Africans living in the fifties. What is remarkable about Bosman's writing is the uniqueness of his style, and the platform his narrative technique gives him to comment on South Africa's social system. In a country where censorship laws made political commentary very difficult, Bosman perfected a technique whereby he could say almost anything he wanted to. By utilising the concept of storytelling, he captured the *zeitgeist* of an era of South African history which laid the foundations of apartheid and had far-reaching effects on countless South African people.

German philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin, in *Illuminations* (1970), makes interesting points about the nature of story-telling. Written in 1937 about the function and task of literature in a socialist society, Benjamin's essay titled "The Author as Producer" argues that storytelling is an artform which is coming to an end as experience of a practical nature which would be passed on from mouth to mouth has been replaced by information which is disseminated and explained by the media. Unlike the listener to a story, the recipient of information is denied the liberty of interpreting events in the way they are personally understood. Instead, the psychological (often emotional, empathetic) connection of events is forced on the listener by means of the explanations offered, and while the narrative elicits a personal response which is the result of an engagement with events, information is received largely superficially, thus lacking the impetus which storytelling carries.

In "Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction" (1991), Njabulo Ndebele applies Benjamin's (1970) theory of storytelling to a South African context. Attacking the dissemination of information through fiction written in a journalistic style, Ndebele advocates a return to the story as a catalyser of truths. By focussing their efforts on uncovering the injustices of apartheid, many black

writers, says Ndebele, collude in the negation of humanity which is the tenet of apartheid politics. Writing from an ideology of victimhood, symbols of evil (the enforcers of apartheid) are juxtaposed with symbols of good (the disempowered) in order to expose social evil; thus, stereotypically formulated *baases*, madams, policemen and cruel farmers victimise and mistreat equally stereotypical beggars, labourers, washerwomen and priests. These 'types' exist ready-made to be manipulated by writers engaged in moral warfare; they have no personal history, and little or no character development, existing as pawns in a broader political context. Brink (1998) explains the situation this way:

One of the many problems posed by the kind of literature produced in (apartheid) circumstances is the reduction of co-ordinates in the situation; a tendency towards simple oppositions and binarities, (and) the binarities persisted in the tendency to reduce the world to predictable patterns of us and them, black and white, good and bad (p.16).

Through the apartheid years, as Brink (1998) explains, reportage was the primary motive of writers caught up in the culture of resistance. It was necessary for the black writer to function as historian, and his/her focus had to be the local struggle in order to promote solidarity amongst the resisters to apartheid. The resultant journalistic style of literature leads to a limited engagement on the part of the reader, and possibly a defensiveness to the accusatory tone of the narratives. As weapons of social and political change, such fictional works are inadequate. The journalistic exposure of social evil results in a literature too superficial to engage the serious thought that could potentially lead to a transformative experience on the part of the reader (Ndebele, 1991). As an antidote to the problem of self-defeating anti-apartheid writing, Ndebele posits the return of the story as a more effective weapon of social change. Unlike sensationalist writing which does little more than confirm and consolidate the reader's perception of a negative social reality, the characteristics of storytelling are conducive to a significantly more personal response. Instead of surface images being puppeteered this way and that, the story engages a reader psychologically, often demanding creative thought in the understanding of events. Explanations are withheld, allowing the reader the opportunity to derive his/her own conclusions from the events of the narrative. Thus, instead of being presented with a set of uninspiring 'facts', the reader attains a relatively active role in the process of narrative development.

As Ndebele explains, the development of character and plot inspire empathy and a sense of emotional involvement on the part of the audience so that the events of the story become almost personally relevant to the sensitive, engaged reader who relates to the predicament of the character(s). In this manner, when a reader's response is not obviously prescribed, but allowed to manifest of its own accord, fiction succeeds in transforming thought and altering preconceptions. In "Turkish Tales" Ndebele discusses Yashar Kemal's *Anatolian Tales* to illustrate his theories about South African writing. A characteristic of Kemal's fiction that strikes and impresses Ndebele is its focus on the lives

of the Turkish peasantry. Kemal's style of writing also reflects the Anatolian tradition of storytelling with its minimum of authorial intervention, and capacity to engage and entertain its audience. Says Ndebele,

There is a difference between art that 'sells' ideas to people, and that whose ideas are embraced by the people because they have been made to understand them through the evocation of lived experience in all its complexities. In the former case, the readers are anonymous buyers; in the latter, they are equals in the quest for truth. All the writer needs to understand is that he can only be genuinely committed to politics through a commitment to art (p.16).

Using this storytelling tradition, Kemal documents and examines the "key social issues affecting some rural and semi-rural communities in one "'Third World' Country, Turkey" (Ndebele, 1991: 11). Kemal's mode of storytelling leads Ndebele to question the non-existence in South Africa of a comparable literature, when many social issues may be paralleled with those affecting peasant Turks. Similarly, he questions the preoccupation with urban culture reflected in much anti-apartheid writing, suggesting that many writers from the liberal institutions of higher learning have, through their essentially anthropological interest in South African society, "consolidated a picture of African society under South African oppression as a debased society" (Ndebele, 1991: 13). As Ndebele suggests, a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy is inadvertently constructed as writers try to fight oppression using the tools of oppression which have been used against them. South African blacks are depicted as victims whose lives are simply a response to the laws of the whites. It is Ndebele's (1991) argument that, while the devastating effects of apartheid cannot be overestimated, this is not a reason for South African writing to be superficial and unimaginative.

In "Storytelling and Politics in Fiction", Michael Vaughan criticises Ndebele's claims for 'storytelling' fiction in the light of his own fictional practice. As Vaughan explains, what characterises Ndebele's stories is their treatment of the 'inner life' – meaning intellectual and emotional processes – of the characters. This concern with the inner life of the protagonist provides the principle of coherence of each story, and differentiates Ndebele's stories from those which he criticises for their sloganistic and journalistic ambience. As Vaughan explains, little of the fiction published by African writers in South Africa shows the same degree of concern with the exploration of the inner life that Ndebele exhibits. However skilful and brilliant an achievement Ndebele's *Fools and Other Stories* is, the skill with which the stories are composed seems to owe little to the 'timeless tradition to storytelling' to which Ndebele refers in 'Turkish Tales' (Vaughan, 1990).⁴

⁴ As Vaughan (1990) explains, the oral *culture* of the African township certainly contributes to the subject-matter of the stories, but Ndebele's skill in the Western, realist tradition of fiction-writing has no obvious link whatsoever to traditional African storytelling. In the same article Vaughan goes so far as to say that an organic relationship with oral culture is an impractical aim for the fiction-writer to pursue because of issues such as class, culture and the relationship between literacy and orality.

However, the success of the stories of Herman Charles Bosman are an indication that an organic relationship between the oral culture of storytelling and the 'culture' of the written word can, and does, exist. While there are important differences between the black South African township dwellers who are the subject-matter of *Fools*, and the rural farmers of Bosman's Groot Marico district, there are similarities which make the fiction of Ndebele and Bosman comparable. Most importantly, both writers produced literature which explored the possibilities of the *story* instead of producing fiction which was simply a reworking of commonly held perceptions – in Ndebele's case, the perception of black South Africans as victims, and in Bosman's case, the perception of white South Africans as racially superior. As Brink explains in an essay titled 'Stories of History: Re-imagining the Past in the Post Apartheid Narrative' (1998),

through perceiving the world as a story to be told and endlessly reshaped, the reader is actually encouraged to act upon the world. Once the world is perceived as a story with an endless capacity for renewal, metamorphosis and reinvention, literature becomes more, not less, potent (p.57).

Ndebele and Bosman forego journalistic 'fact', focusing instead on the story. For both writers, the storytelling genre serves this purpose. Bosman's style of storytelling both reflects and refutes the political ideology of pre-democratic South Africa. In order to understand the stubbornness, dogmatism and oftentimes bloody-mindedness of the Afrikaners who instituted apartheid, it is necessary to understand that at the basis of Afrikaner politics is the belief that the world is essentially ethnic in social organisation. In Bosman's '*plaasroman*' writing, stories happen within a community of people, and his characters are developed through their conversations with other members of the community. The reader's perception of an individual is very often Oom Schalk Lourens's perception, or the perception of the *voorkamer* farmers. Characters are made 'real' through the comments we hear about them, and very seldom through a description of the character, him or herself. In this way, Bosman's farmers as individuals are unremarkable, and rely on the other farmers to give them an identity. Through this narrative technique Bosman accentuates the perception that the Afrikaners of the Groot Marico are indeed part of a community, one with particular customs, attitudes and habits; moreover, what he succeeds in highlighting is the fact that these farmers are amongst the last remnants of a dying tribe whose survival comprises a constant, fated struggle against nature.

Bosman's depiction of the Afrikaner and his land reflects a significant departure from the way in which writers of the 'verafrikaansing' movement portrayed this relationship. Unlike the endless, fertile plains of the traditional *plaasroman* which had the refined, middle-class head of the household enjoying health, wealth and sovereignty, Bosman's farmers are rough, poor, ill-mannered and ignorant, thereby challenging the 'verafrikaansing' movement's perception of white South Africans. Bosman's Marico farms are a far cry from the fertile greenness of C.M. van den Heever's *verlore*

vlakte; on the contrary, they're dry and sparse and almost uninhabitable. While *plaasroman* earth is rich and abundantly yielding, Bosman's farmers' lives are a daily battle with Africa, as droughts, rinderpest, *miltsiekte* and theft threaten to bankrupt them. If, as J.M. Coetzee argues, the relationship between the farm and the farmer of the *plaasroman* is supramaterial (1988), the relationship the Marico farmer has with his farm is straightforward and physical. It's a relationship based on survival, not romance. For the farm novelists, the struggle for land ownership was one between natural right and historical forces (they believed that God intended for the Afrikaner people to own the land, but in order for this to happen, they had to fight off the English and the blacks); Bosman's farmers are at war with nature. In the semi-desert of the Groot Marico there is nothing 'natural' about imposing the will of the white farmers on the land, and a recurring motif in Bosman's short fiction is of Africa reclaiming herself: animals die in defiance of their owners; water in tanks dries up; the *haak-en-steek* thorn encroaches. There is a sense that one day, when the last white farmer has packed his *trommel* and left, the wind will sweep away his footsteps and his house will crumble into the earth until no sign of his existence remains.

Thus, just as the farm of the *plaasroman* and its hierarchical structure exists as a microcosm of South African society, so Bosman's farm represents a scaled-down version of South Africa, but the end result is very different. As much as the *plaasroman* writer seeks to romanticise and eulogise the white man's claim to the land, Bosman de-romanticises it by showing it to be as unnatural and unromantic as the outcome of segregationist politics. His subjects are not the sophisticated exponents of a well-thought-through and justifiable ideology; on the contrary, they are the ignorant and usually good-natured victims of a system they had no part in setting up, but which they follow because they're incapable of independent and critical thought. They're an isolated, essentially peasant, community with community values and a justice system based on Calvinist teachings. They are far from the colonising heroes of the *plaasroman* who weave magic on the African landscape; instead, they're silly and petty and beset with human frailties. They are also vain, hypocritical and often bloody-minded, but there's a humanness in their characters which makes them likeable (in fact, the only characters who receive a harsh treatment from Bosman are the teachers and scholars from out-of-town who contrive to be better than the boers).

With resonances of what J.M. Coetzee said forty years later in his Jerusalem Speech regarding South Africans writing as if from prison,⁵ Bosman said,

Considering the almost impossible handicaps under which they have worked, our writers have not done so badly. Bound hand and foot, they have nevertheless put up a remarkably game struggle (Gray, 1986: 80).

Whatever his motives were, Bosman succeeded in re-writing the segment of South African history which implied that all white South Africans were conscious exponents of apartheid, and that relations between blacks and whites were static and immutable. Diverging from an aesthetic preoccupation with the land which marks the *plaasroman* writers' resistance to dealing with social reality, Bosman's interest lies in the community, and the particular nature of the social interactions which reinforce racial segregation. Instead of writing about ploughing and reaping, Bosman writes about the people, and depicts the reality of racial intolerance amongst a section of the South African population. What is unique about his fiction is the fact that he doesn't shy away from representing race relations in South Africa, uncomfortable as they are, and he manages to represent them in a way that's not accusatory, but reflective and thought-provoking. In this respect Bosman echoes Njabulo Ndebele's theories about fiction-writing in 'Rediscovery of the Ordinary'. To take an accusatory tone about politics would only inspire defensiveness, as Ndebele explains, but by writing stories about Marico Afrikaners as a fellow Afrikaner and using Afrikaans idiom, Bosman beguiles his audience through the use of various narrative techniques (which I shall discuss in detail later) to listen to his message.

Critics of Bosman's work have paid too much attention to what is said, and not enough to the way it is said. My argument is that Bosman's failure to address politics directly in his narratives does not reflect an inability to comprehend the injustice of the physical and psychic separation of blacks from whites, nor an unwillingness to take on the mammoth task of trying to move the white, right-wing masses over to the left, but rather a sober, conscious awareness of the fact that in the context of South African literature what is implied often carries more weight.

⁵ Attwell, 1992 : *Doubling the Point*, p. 98

Chapter Two : Silence, Amnesia and the Politics of Memory

We are what we remember; we are also what we forget

(Margaret Atwood, 1996)⁶

In a situation such as South Africa's where the claims and methodologies of history have undergone, and continue to undergo, a process of deconstruction, new ways have had to be found to uncover the voices which, prior to 1996, had been silenced by the power establishment. The most widely publicised attempt at redressing apartheid's injustice and re-writing South Africa's fragmented narrative was the televised Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) which comprised the oral testimonies of 'ordinary' people – the victims of violence, as well as the perpetrators of it. One of the aims of the TRC was to establish

as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights which were committed during the period from 1 March 1960 to the cut-off date, including the antecedents, circumstances, factors and context of such violations, as well as the perspectives of the victims and the motives and perspectives of the persons responsible for the commission of the violations, by conducting investigations and holding hearings (Bock, 2000: 2).

One of its purposes, other than the granting of indemnity to criminals whose "crimes were the substance of the historical truths it sought to expose" (Holiday, 1998: 46), was to supply a podium from which South Africans could tell their stories about life under an apartheid government. These personalised accounts by individuals comprised a series of 'micronarratives' which, when placed together, would contradict the unreliable narrative of National Party historical text. The method used by the TRC to fill the official 'black holes' in history was the personal memory of people whose lives were affected by the institutionalised racism of National Party politics, and these recountings of personal memory were documented as part of the process of remaking collective memory of the past (Minkley and Rassool, 1998).

It is significant, as Ndebele (1998) recalls, that during the first round of TRC hearings in East London, Archbishop Desmond Tutu referred to the TRC testimonies as 'stories'. Given the omissions and one-sidedness of National Party historical text, it has become necessary for historiographers to incorporate the stories of 'ordinary' people in rewriting the past. As I discussed in the previous chapter (and to repeat J.M. Coetzee's description), one of the effects of apartheid's stricture was that the literature produced in South Africa seemed like it was written from a prison. The silence which existed in the place of the voices of marginalised South Africans was joined by a silence in the literature as the imagination seemed to 'shut down' in a context more outrageous, unreal and shocking than a work of

fiction could hope to be. As Boehmer (1998) explains, South African literature in the last decade of apartheid reflected a sense of hesitation and restraint as both stylistic and thematic levels as writers seemed unable to envision a time *after* apartheid. While the writer, during this time, was in the relatively unique position of having the opportunity to anticipate, foretell and predict the future, the novels end, instead, in a difficult and frozen 'now' (Boehmer, 1998). Through their silences, their constraint, and what can even be called their pessimism, many novels of the late eighties reflect the consciousness of a nation on the brink of what could either turn out to be a positive rebirth or a state of complete social and economic collapse.

If the imagination 'shut down' in the face of the political and psychic States of Emergency imposed by apartheid politics, it has still not fully resurrected itself. What has emerged, and will continue to emerge during the long and challenging process of rewinding and redocumenting history, is the restoration of multiple narratives: if the single, authoritative historical voice proved, in the context of South Africa, to be an unreliable narrator, the antidote to more traditional forms of historical documentation is the employment of multiple voices. In exploring the relationship of memory to history in William Kentridge's *History of the Main Complaint*,⁷ Godby (1998) discusses the

re-emergence of narrative after years of neglect by historians. (...) But, instead of the traditional narrative of nineteenth century historians which appeared to encompass all events from a single authoritative point of view, the trend now is for historians to present a narrative fragment, and to situate it in the historical structures of the institutions, social or economic frameworks, and modes of thought in which it takes place (p.106).

Historians, as Godby (1998) explains, have started to use the literary device of multiple narratives in order to "render the complexity and contradiction of historical experience, and so signal their conviction that history is not simply what happened, but a particular view of what happened" (p. 106). The TRC is a good example of the fact that re-writing the past is a venture which relies heavily on memory, and on the particular ways in which people remember and forget. While its focus was on making known the fate of apartheid's victims in order to restore dignity and facilitate reparation (Bock, 2000), a spin-off of the TRC was the emergence of an officially unrecorded past.

Given the unreliability and silences of South African historical text, researchers and historians have had to turn to the orally-recounted memories of black South Africans in order to get a perspective of their lives during the apartheid era. In *Facing the Storm: Portraits of Black Lives in South Africa* (1998), Tim Keegan documents a narrative version of 'truth' by recording the life stories of three

⁶ from the novel *Alias Grace* quoted by Andre Brink in Nuttall, 1998, p.35

⁷ *History of the Main Complaint* is an animated film which William Kentridge was commissioned to make for the *Faultlines* exhibition held at the castle in Cape Town in 1996. As Godby explains, the film, like the

black South African farm labourers. Allowing for what he calls the “error, misconception, elision, distortion and downright fabrication” (p.162) of fact which frequently occur in the idiosyncratic memory-banks of human beings, he nevertheless argues that

individual memory is usually an indispensable source of evidence at the historian’s disposal, (and) in the narratives of ordinary people’s lives we begin to see some of the major forces of history at work, large social forces that are arguably the real key to understanding the past (p.127).

He goes on to explain that ‘ordinary’ lives embody something of the common experience of the larger social group, and each individual’s life reveals aspects of an ethnic group, a class, a geographical region and a community. For this reason, given the silences of the written sources, individual memory is often an indispensable source at a historian’s disposal.

If acknowledging the personal narratives of civilians is a way of recapturing this past, another way of accessing history through narrative is through the literature. My argument, in this chapter, is that the short stories of Herman Charles Bosman comprise a rare and important ‘window’ onto the kind of racialised thinking which helped to form apartheid. Bosman’s narratives depict a segment of South African society whose attitudes it would be a mistake to forget. Underlying the humour and the apparent frivolity of the Groot Marico stories is a very serious message about human nature and the corrupting effect of power. It is also testimony to Bosman’s skill as a narrator that his stories survived the enormous political turbulence of the past half-century, and the concomitant changes in literary theory and appreciation. New editions of his books continue to appear, and his role as a recorder of truths and an important contributor to ‘collective memory’ needs to be acknowledged.

In David Goldblatt’s foreword to *The Illustrated Bosman* (1993), he describes a visit to the Marico bushveld in 1964 “in search of Bosman’s milieu.” He was able to track down the areas Bosman refers to in his short stories, as well as some of the inhabitants Bosman describes in his tales. What Goldblatt realised, with incredulity, was that not only did Bosman use real place names in his stories, but the real names of people, too. Curious to know what the remaining Marico farmers thought of Bosman’s stories, he asked them whether the tales were an accurate account of life in the bushveld. The invariable answer was, “ja, dit was ons” (“yes, that was us”). As Goldblatt explains, they were “neither flattered nor incensed at having their own families’ names and characters thus enlarged upon” (p.1 of foreword to *The Illustrated Bosman*). This astonishing truth separates Bosman’s tales from literary criticism of him in the past which seem to regard his work as amusing ‘little’ stories, or that concentrate on his skill as a storyteller and largely overlook the thematic concerns of his narratives. If

exhibition, was “intended to address the issues of memory, truth and reconciliation that engage South Africa at [that] time” (p.100).

we are to believe the Marico inhabitants and accept that the Groot Marico tales contain more 'truth' than fiction, Bosman's work deserves to be taken seriously as a record of the attitudes and perceptions which fuelled apartheid ideology and had such a profound effect on the identities and life experiences of South African people.

Much of the literature which came out of South Africa in the first half of the last century reflected the tendency of white South Africans to obliterate the colour 'black' from their vision. The *plaasroman* genre, particularly, demonstrates an amazing ability by white writers to remove anyone non-white from the African horizon. As political instruments, these novels were very effective in moulding the consciousness of a large proportion of South African people. To put the point crudely, the unconscious thought process amongst the majority of readers of that literature was that, if blacks were too insignificant to feature in South African literature, they were too insignificant to be granted political rights. Since most of the writing of the *verafrikaansing* movement was singular in its purpose, it was easy to make the mistake, as Lewis Nkosi seems to do in "The Transplanted Heart" (1975), of placing Bosman in the same category as the *plaasroman* writers of the 1920s, 30s and 40s. This oversight reflects the tendency, when critically engaging with South African literature in the past, to look for obvious signs of its commitment to challenging the injustice of separatist politics. It also reflects the 'shutting down' of the imagination in the midst of the urgency to evince social change.

Nkosi (1975) argues that, in Bosman's work generally, blacks are "rarely more than shadows" and that they are used by Bosman merely as "foils for playing off his Boer characters for whom he claimed the real stage" (Gray, 1986: 144). William Plomer, too, in his foreword to the collection *Unto Dust* (1963) says,

Bosman seems to have been too much involved with his personal life to show any of that obsession with racial conflicts which have been so marked in some of his contemporaries among South African writers (p.11).

Both of these standpoints assume that race, for Bosman, took a back seat to the preoccupations of his characters, and that he was more concerned to present "the involvements of passion, love, hate, fidelity, infidelity, history and death in such a way that they are made universally human" (Plomer, 1963: 11). The standpoints of Nkosi and Plomer also overlook the fact that Bosman's narratives are situated in a particular time and place, and that the regularity with which racial themes appear in the stories reflect what can only be a keen consciousness of race. The fact that Bosman does not have a Mchopi or a Bechuana sitting beside Oom Schalk on the *riempies* bench does not stand as a valid criticism of his work. It does not reflect racism, nor an insensitivity to racial issues, in my opinion. What it reflects, firstly, is the fact that within that community you would probably never see a white and a black person sharing a bench, and secondly, it connotes an understanding of the dangers inherent

in a white voice (again) telling a black story, and a recognition, as a white writer, of his distance from black experience.

Contrary to the arguments of Nkosi and Plomer, race issues are an integral part of Bosman's narratives. Where the *plaasroman* novels talked about the beauty of the landscape and ignored the ugliness of the social interactions happening within that landscape, Bosman focuses directly on that ugliness. Given what Brink (1998) calls the "private motivations, hidden agendas, prejudices, suspicions... and conditionings" (p.39) which render human versions of 'reality' unreliable, it would be difficult to argue that Bosman's short stories are less truthful or as untruthful as the literature produced by other Afrikaners in the forties and fifties. If, as Brink explains, a story does not bring light to 'the' truth, but at most a version of it, then Bosman's narratives constitute an important version of South African truth, and one which has not been widely contained in narrative form. The value of different versions of truth, as opposed to the kind of teleology which informed the older traditions of historiography, is that it allows one to compare a variety of versions in order to choose among them, or to construct a composite image of all of them (Brink, 1998).

The alacrity with which white people living in a newly democratic society seem to want the past, and the roles (however passive) they played in maintaining apartheid, to be forgotten, is analogous to the tendency expressed by one of the protagonists in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1986). He says,

The mind... is like a house – thoughts which the owner no longer wishes to display, or those which arouse painful memories, are thrust out of sight, and consigned to the attic or cellar; and in forgetting, as in the storage of broken furniture, there is surely an element of will at work (quoted by Brink in Nuttall, 1998, p.33).

As Brink (1998) explains, memory, which is always selective, comprises not only "acts of recovery but also processes of suppression" (p.36), and the apartheid memory, in the process of reshaping history around the national consciousness of the Afrikaner, has been constrained to forget large segments of the South African past. But if the re-writing of South African history is to be a process of combining a variety of different narratives in order to get a closer idea of what 'really' happened, it must include narratives such as the ones Bosman wrote.

Like the 'storytellers' of the TRC, the Koos Nienabers, Frik Loubbers and Krisjan Geelses⁸ of the Groot Marico possibly have a lot to teach historians and readers through their personal accounts of life in apartheid South Africa. In most of his short stories Bosman employs one of the Marico farmers as his speaker, and it's usually Oom Schalk Lourens. In the Voorkamer stories, however, Bosman uses an

⁸ People who feature, and whose families feature in Bosman's narratives, and whom David Goldblatt (1993) tracked down on a visit to the Groot Marico (cf p.2 of 'Introduction').

unusual technique. There is hardly anything, in these stories, in the line of 'plot' or narration. Instead, Bosman lets the stories 'develop' in the form of conversations amongst a small group of men gathered in Jurie Styen's *voorkamer* which serves as the Drogevelei Post Office. The 'stories' seem to have no theme particularly; they appear to be casual meanderings from one topic to the next, usually punctuated by amusing arguments and misunderstandings amongst the speakers. Unlike the Oom Schalk Lourens stories, which have a single narrator, the Voorkamer pieces (which were written later) can be seen as a further development of Bosman's interest in oral narrative modes and his preoccupation with storytelling (MacKenzie, 1999).

A closer look at the style of these stories illuminates the fact that, considering the brevity of the tales (most are about 2000 words in length) Bosman used careful planning and amazing economy in their narration. As Lionel Abrahams explains in his foreword to *Jurie Steyn's Post Office* (1971), Bosman interweaves two or three themes in a seeming "off-handed throwing together of incongruous topics [and] attitudes" (p.8). His stylistic device, that being a complete absence of authorial intervention and what appears to be the politically neutral recording of conversations amongst people, resembles the orally recounted stories told by the 'ordinary people' of Tim Keegan's (1998) book. The tales told by the Marico farmers comprise what Minkley and Rassool (1998) call the oral history which is seen as the connection between historians and the voice of the community, or in other words, between memory and history.

Bosman's treatment of important themes such as the racist attitudes of the farmers is presented in what appears to be as noncommittal a way as a speaker's commentary on the weather, for example, or the rising taxes imposed by the government. This 'casualness' inherent in his narrative technique is what has led critics such as Lionel Abrahams (1990) to argue that the side which Bosman, himself, is on is impossible to determine, an assertion which testifies to the cleverness of Bosman's style. While he appears to be a neutral observer to the goings-on of the small community, his narratives comprise a very astute observation of the way in which apartheid thinking was, for the average white South African, not about thinking, but rather what Ndebele calls "the psychology of maintenance" (1999, p23). As Ndebele (1998) explains, the transcendent values which may once have informed apartheid's value system became, simply, the psychology of habit, which made prejudice not a conscious, thought-through decision, but rather a standard mode of perception. What Bosman very effectively highlights is the fact that the farmers' ill-treatment of the blacks living on the outskirts of the white community was due less to malice or mean-spiritedness than it was due to a quite stunning ignorance. In other words, it was not that the farmers made conscious decisions to institute racial discrimination in their community, but rather that their ignorance of the world generally (which Bosman in many instances illustrates) made them incapable of engaging in the critical thought needed to challenge and change the social system. Through his depiction of the values and belief-system of an isolated farming

community we are able to glean important insights into Keegan's "social forces" (1998: 127) which had, and continue to have, a significant effect on socio-historic South Africa.

In his 'Jerusalem Prize' acceptance speech in 1987 J.M. Coetzee discusses the "South African gulag", by which he means a country which has imprisoned itself though its inability to love, and to have what he calls "fraternity" with the people who owned the land before the white colonisers arrived (Atwell, 1998: 97). Coetzee describes a misdirected love; one which is pointed at nature – at the "mountains and deserts, birds and animals and flowers" things which are the least likely to respond to love (p.97). As I said briefly in the previous chapter, Bosman's Groot Marico stories comprise a marked deviation from the *plaasroman* genre produced by writers in the first half of the last century. There is a sense, in the farm novels, of writers trying to fill the silences of socio-political history with what Coetzee calls "excessive" talk about the beauty of the land (Atwell, 1992: 97). In a country of vastness, he explains, a literature of vastness was produced; one that 'scaled out' and focused away from the country's social problems to concentrate, instead, on what was easy to narrate: the colour of *vygies*, Karoo *koppies*, the limitless African sky. Bosman, by contrast, does not try to create an impression of vastness. If the plains of the traditional farm novel appear to be boundless, Bosman's Marico farms have very definite boundaries, and it's a motif, in the Groot Marico stories, to make these boundaries known. They are inserted in the narratives in as seemingly casual a way as Bosman's racial commentary, or his off-hand depiction of the ignorance of his Boer protagonists. Where the situational details of the *plaasroman* novels are often vague, a technique which highlights their dreamy, fictional nature, Bosman consistently refers to the specifics of the place where his story unfolds.

There are many examples of this stylistic technique in Bosman's narratives, but two chosen at random are in *Mafeking Road* (1991) and *Jurie Steyn's Post Office* (1971) respectively:

If you walk over my farm to the hoogte, and look towards the north-west, you can see abjaterskop behind the ridge of the Dwarsberge (p.13).

Bosman's attention to geographical detail is minute, and his seemingly casual descriptions of the farmers' concerns about where their farms end and begin reflects some of what can be called the national paranoia amongst white South Africans about land ownership, a paranoia which helped form the building-blocks of apartheid. The passage from *Jurie Steyn's Post Office* illustrates this paranoia:

What was more, Gysbert van Tonder could walk right into his voorkamer whenever he liked, and without knocking. Gysbert was Jurie Steyn's neighbour, and Jurie had naturally not been on friendly terms with him since the time Gysbert van Tonder got a justice of the peace and a land-surveyor and a policeman riding a skimmel-horse to explain to Jurie Steyn on what side of the vlei the boundary fence ran (p.13).

In Bosman's narratives these references to areas, boundaries and land which is fenced and demarcated create a sense of the South African gulag which Coetzee refers to in his 1987 speech (p.98). The Marico farmers are isolated, both spatially and ideologically, from the rest of the world. They are the descendants of the Trekboers who travelled north to escape British imperialism, but instead of being heroes who risked their lives to preserve the Afrikaans language and culture, there is something sad and vaguely pathetic about the tiny community living in the lonely, northern-most reaches of the Transvaal bushveld, and which finds itself stuck in a social system it had no part in constructing but which it is obliged to propagate.

There is pathos, also, in the sense Bosman's fences create of their being no further 'north' for the farmers to go in their desire to escape the British, on the one hand, and the blacks, on the other. There being no further 'north' for them to 'travel' applies also to their rejection of foreign education and influence. Through their unenlightened attitudes, the farmers of the Groot Marico have isolated themselves from the rest of humanity, and they have no choice but to turn their attention 'inwards' on the people who make up the community. They have imposed their own 'sanctions' on anything different or 'other'; anything that might upset the smooth running of their closed and rigid social system. In this way the insular community of white farmers comprises a microcosmic representation of white South Africa who found (and finds) itself unfree to break down the system of apartness which it built for itself. Bosman's farmers live in a 'prison' built by their forebears, and if the premise was to keep anyone out who was not 'kin' (in other words, who was not white) the inevitable result is that they, themselves, become trapped; victims of their own cunning.

Coetzee sums up very well the conundrum which white South Africans, desirous of changing, find themselves in. He says,

The veiled unfreedom of the white man in South Africa has always made itself felt most keenly when, stepping down for a moment from his lonely throne, giving in to a wholly human and understandable yearning for fraternity with the people among whom he lives, he has discovered with shock that fraternity by itself is not to be had, no matter how compellingly felt the impulse on both sides. Fraternity ineluctably comes in a package with liberty and equality (p.97).

What Bosman illustrates in many of the narratives is the fact that a community which cuts itself off from the life-blood of the rest of humanity must atrophy and soon die. The truth of Bosman's prophecy is evident in the Marico which David Goldblatt (1993) found merely a couple of decades after Bosman wrote the narratives. Goldblatt describes the area as follows:

Years of drought and overgrazing have in great areas completely destroyed the grass and its roots. Over the bald patches the bush, thorny and hostile, encroaches. As a result the area is being depopulated and those farmers who have survived now run vast consolidated

estates. They are for the most part the middle-aged and the old, with their children. The nubile girls and uncouth lads of *Mafeking Road* and *Unto Dust* are hardly ever seen. They go to the towns and never return. Bosman's bushveld is passing away (p.1).

If the Marico descendants of the Trekboers believe, like their forefathers did, that this cordoned-off piece of African bush is theirs forever once they built their fences and dug their dams, Bosman illuminates, in many of his narratives, the transitory nature of their appropriation of the land.

It is necessary, at this point, to take a closer look at the narratives themselves as examples of the ways in which Bosman made such profound and important observations in the relatively limited authorial space of his very short short stories. 'White Ant' from *Jurie Steyn's Post Office* (1971) is a good example of one of the 'clues' Bosman provides about the ephemeral nature of the farmers' occupation of the land, and macrocosmically, the white colonisation of Africa. Certainly one of Bosman's most amusing narratives, 'White Ant' is a useful example to cite because it embodies all of the themes Bosman follows, using various methods, in the Voorkamer stories: the unromance of life in the Groot Marico, the rejection of education and resultant ignorance of the farmers, their crudeness and lack of sophistication, their racism, and finally the overarching threat of Africa reclaiming herself. Through a series of conversational twists and meta-narratives, Bosman uses the metaphor of the white ant to illuminate the futility of white people imposing their will on the African landscape, and by making the Marico inhabitants his speakers, Bosman assumes no responsibility for the values and opinions they hold. The narrative begins with the 'postmaster' Jurie Steyn applying paraffin to the side of the post-office counter in an attempt to prevent the ants from chewing through his stamps. This leads to a discussion amongst Jurie, the schoolmaster, At Naude, Gysbert van Tonder, Chris Welman and Oupa Bekker about the nature of the white ant, and the conversation meanders through the abovementioned themes until the schoolmaster promises Jurie a book which deals with the permanent extermination of the vexing ant. Predictably, when the schoolmaster goes to fetch the book, he finds that the passages dealing with the eradication of white ants have been eaten away.

Bosman's message in this, and many other of his narratives, is clear: white people can clear an area of bush and build their homesteads and churches, but the structures are impermanent, and after enough time has passed they will crumble, and the land will return to its former state. Bosman's farmhouses, schoolhouses and churches can be seen as metaphorical representations of separatist ideology in the larger South Africa, the buildings representing the concrete examples of what the architects of apartheid dreamed up in theory form. What Bosman illuminates is the lengths to which white South Africans went to impose and retain a social system which favoured them, and what he highlights are the hardships of life in the bushveld and the fact that Africa seems determined to evict the white community from their borrowed land. As 'White Ant' depicts, no amount of 'paraffin' or legislation or theories contained in books are enough to safeguard a form of appropriation of the land which is based

on the shaky premise of racial superiority. The misdirected and ignorant nature of apartheid's separatist social system is beautifully portrayed in the following passage:

He himself (said the schoolmaster) was interested in the white ant (...) mainly from a scientific point of view. The white ant belonged to the insect world, which was really very highly civilised, he said. All the insect world didn't have was haemoglobin. The insect had the same blood in his veins as a white man, the schoolmaster said, except for haemoglobin. Gysbert van Tonder said that whatever that thing was, it was enough. Gysbert said it quite hastily, too. He said that once you started making allowances for the white ant that way, the next thing the white ant would want to vote. And he wouldn't go into a polling booth alongside of an ant, to vote, Gysbert van Tonder said, even if the ant was white (p.35).

Through this passage alone – and this one does not deal directly with blacks – it is clear that Lionel Abrahams's (1988) argument which states that Bosman's political standpoint is difficult to gauge is invalid. Bosman's ironic depiction of race relations, and his references to the inevitable breaking down of the social system, situate him clearly on the side of the writers who sought to oppose apartheid. If he does not refer directly to 'race' or 'politics' in his narratives, it is not because he was oblivious to these concepts. Rather, it was due to an awareness of the fact that, in order for his political message to escape the censor's⁹ net, and for his narratives to be widely accepted and read by white South Africa, it was necessary for him to couch his views in the voice and language of the oppressor.

Ndebele's (1991) argument regarding "accusatory" writing which inspires "defensiveness" (p.16) on the part of the reader is relevant in this instance. As Ndebele argues (and as I explained in the previous chapter), in order for literature to create social change it must capture the imagination of its audience. Through emphasising the authenticity of his Marico tales through his detailed references to specific places, his diction which sounds like a direct translation from Afrikaans into English, and through using the 'Marico inhabitants' as his speakers, Bosman 'tricks' his reader into believing that s/he is sitting beside Oupa Bekker on the *stoep*, and privy to a private conversation had by a group of friends. It is easy to imagine, given Bosman's stylistic technique, that these conversations happened exactly as they are recorded.

⁹ The Native Administration Act of 1927 which operated under the auspices of "provid(ing) for better management and control of native affairs" allowed the prohibition of anything which could alter the system of government. As Christopher Merret (1994) explains, the most famous provision of this act was the 'hostility clause' which forbade any act of "promo(ing) feelings of hostility between the different races of the Union" (p.14). According to the Riotous Assemblies Act of 1930 which prohibited the circulation of anything considered "inflammatory material", a writer's choice of material was severely proscribed. Individuals writing during this time did so in an atmosphere of what Merret calls "almost hysterical anti-communism" (p.14), resulting in a marked unfreedom of expression. The Suppression of Communism Act which was passed in South Africa in 1950 was the culmination of these earlier acts into a massive structure of censorship, and it gave the government free persecutory reign. These censorship laws controlled publications in South Africa until the mid-nineties (Merret, 1994).

Bosman uses the Marico locale as a very innovative literary device to expose the social forces which laid the foundations of apartheid. In his use of literature as so incisive and sophisticated a tool of social commentary, Bosman was too progressive for the critics of previous decades. As Stephen Gray explains in his introduction to *Herman Charles Bosman* (1986),

Bosman has always presented literary scholarship is South Africa with a 'problem case'; it is the intention of this collection to unravel the extent and complexity of this problem and, hopefully, once and for all to set his work free for more thoughtful and probing analyses than heretofore have been – with a few exceptions – the case (p.25).

An analysis which does Bosman's work more justice than it has thus far received must take into account the political context in which he was writing. During the years in which Bosman wrote, there was not the same consciousness of silence as there was decades later and which significantly influenced the literature of writers such as Nadine Gordimer, Andre Brink and J.M. Coetzee. However, in its recording of the social forces at work in a segment of the South African population, Bosman made very important in-roads into the way in which a story can be told by a white author without silencing black experience. As a white writer, and a member of what Coetzee calls the "master-caste" (1992: 96), Bosman was aware of the presumptuousness, and the colonising effect, of speaking for black South Africa and trying to fill black silence with another white voice. Instead, he used what means he had at his disposal to expose the racist attitudes of the white farmers whom he'd come to know.

In 1948 Bosman made his position clear in an essay titled "Aspects of South African Literature" published in the September edition of *Trek*:

Don't let us have the cheek to go and try to poach on the preserves of [the black man's] bitternesses... without having shared them. In any case, how can a white man get into a black man's skin and vice versa? That sort of thing is presumption, and can only produce falseness in art (Gray, 1986: 95).

Bosman's relatively limited position as a white South African did not, however, prevent him from depicting, often with shocking straightforwardness, the ugliness of the treatment of blacks by whites.

It is necessary, by way of exemplifying some of the points made in this chapter, to cite passages from Bosman's narratives which deal directly with race. As I state in the Introduction in Gray's (1986) collection, Glenn Lawson (1986) presents the most insightful essay written on Bosman's treatment of race and identity in the Groot Marico stories, and I would like to extrapolate on some of Lawson's analyses of these passages. 'Makapan's Caves' from *Mafeking Road* (1991) is probably the most poignant and disturbing of all of Bosman's short stories, and the fact that he created a very readable short story out of an historic tragedy is testimony to his skill and fearlessness as a writer. As Lawson

(1982) explains, 'Makapan's Caves' is a very useful introduction to Bosman's treatment of race because it illustrates both the fact that Bosman's interest was in exposing the horrors of the wars between the blacks and the Boers (which, off the battlefield, existed as a silent and far more insidious war) as well as the limitations Bosman faces as a writer-member of the 'oppressor tribe'. Dorothy Driver says Bosman consistently rides "roughshod over some sensitivity or other" (Gray, 1986: 83), and his opening lines to 'Makapan's Caves' are typical of this technique whereby he shocks his audience into giving him their full attention:

Kafirs? (said Oom Schalk Lourens). Yes, I know them. And they're all the same. I fear the almighty, and I respect his works, but I could never understand why he made the kafir and the rinderpest. The Hottentot is a little better. The Hottentot will only steal the biltong hanging out on the line to dry. He won't steal the line as well. That is where the kafir is different.

Still, sometimes you come across a good kafir, one who is faithful and upright and a true Christian and doesn't let the wild dog catch the sheep. I always think that it isn't right to kill that kind of kafir.

I remember one kafir we had by the name of Nongaas...
(*Mafeking Road*, 1986, p.62).

The story, while touching on various themes, documents a situation in which a young Bechuana, Nongaas, attaches himself to Schalk Lourens's family and develops an intense devotion to Schalk's older brother, Hendrik. Eventually, Nongaas accompanies Schalk and Hendrik to join a force of commandos sent to punish Sotho chief Makapan for the murder of a party of white settlers. To quote again from the story, "a commando was called up from our district to go and attack the tribe and teach them to have respect for the white man's skin" (p.56). Makapan and his tribe take refuge in some caves which the Boers besiege in an attempt to get them out. In order to save ammunition, the Boers surround the ridge with the intention of starving the tribespeople to death. During the attack Hendrik is injured and Nongaas risks his life to save him. Through a series of events Nongaas ends up getting accidentally shot and killed by Schalk. As usual in the narratives, themes are 'accidentally' touched on, for example the self-serving nature of the brand of Calvinism practised by the Boers ("...pray the Lord to help you, and when you shoot always aim for the stomach", p.64); the brutal and unglamorous nature of warfare ("...already, when the wind blew towards us from the mouth of the cave, the stink (of decaying corpses) was terrible", p.65), and a brotherhood of man which has the capacity to clear superficial boundaries such as race.

But the overriding statement Bosman makes in 'Makapan's Caves' is a condemnation of the inability by the Boers to see Makapan's tribespeople as human beings. If the account of an entire tribe of people being starved to death amongst the rotting bodies of their family members so that the Boers could save ammunition is not enough to inspire compassion and shame in his white audience, Bosman takes an

unusual amount of effort in the development of Nongaas's character. In the following passages Nongaas shows more loyalty, bravery and humanity than any of the farmers Bosman describes:

All the preparations were made, and the following morning we got ready to attack. My brother Hendrik was very proud and happy at having been chosen for the more dangerous part. He oiled his gun very carefully and polished up his veldskoens. Then Nongaas came up and I noticed that he looked very miserable.

"My baas," he said to my brother Hendrik, "you mustn't go and fight. They'll shoot you dead."

My brother shook his head.

"Then let me go with you, baas," Nongaas said. "I will go in front and look after you." Hendrik only laughed.

"Look here, Nongaas," he said, "you can stay behind and cook the dinner. I will get back in time to eat it" (p.66).

This passage highlights both Nongaas's devotion to Hendrik, as well as the latter's inability to see and appreciate it. To Hendrik, in spite of the years he's known him, Nongaas is good for nothing better than preparing the evening meal and waiting on him. The folly in being unable to see Nongaas in a role other than that of servant is well illustrated by a passage further on when Nongaas has prepared the meal, but Hendrik has failed to return:

I looked up again, about half an hour later, and I saw Nongaas walking away with a water-bottle and a small sack strapped to his back. He said nothing to me, but I knew he was going to look for my brother Hendrik. Nongaas knew that if his baas was still alive he would need him. So he went to him. That was all. For a while I watched Nongaas as he crept along through the rocks and bushes. I supposed it was his intention to lie in wait near one of the caves and then crawl inside when the night came. That was a very brave thing to do. If Makapan's kafirs saw him they would be sure to kill him... (p.67).

Thus, Nongaas shows more loyalty towards Hendrik than his own brother does. By the next day, when Hendrik and Nongaas still do not return, Schalk has no option but to go and look for them himself. Eventually he finds Hendrik who tells him the story of how he sprained his ankle and couldn't get back:

"Then Nongaas came," my brother Hendrik said.

"Nongaas?" I asked him.

"Yes," he replied. "He found me and gave me food and water, and carried me on his back. Then the water gave out and I was very thirsty. So Nongaas took the bottle to go and fill it at the pan. But it is very dangerous to get there, and I am so frightened they may kill him."

"But they will not kill him," I said. "Nongaas will come back." I said that, but in my heart I was afraid. For the caves were many and dark, and the kafirs were blood-mad. It would not do to wait. So I lifted Hendrik on my shoulder and carried him towards the entrance. He was in much pain.

"You know," he whispered, "Nongaas was crying when he found me. He thought I was dead. He has been very good to me – so very good. Do you remember that day when he followed behind our wagons? He looked so very trustful and so little, and yet I – I threw stones at him. I wish I did not do that. I only hope that he comes back safe. He was crying and stroking my hair" (1986, p.69).

Lewis Nkosi's criticism, in reference to this story, that Bosman uses blacks merely as foils for playing off his Boer characters (Gray, 1986, p.145) is invalidated in the light of these passages. If anything, in this narrative, the Boers are foils for playing off Nongaas's character. As Lawson (1982) argues, if Schalk Lourens's party exemplifies the spreading white settlement backed by growing white power in South Africa, and Makapan the militant resistance to white authority, then Nongaas embodies the answer to Oom Schalk's question at the beginning of the narrative. Through his deceptively simple style, Bosman queries and censures one of apartheid's most important and most damaging tenets – the belief that black South Africans are less than human – and if the metaphors Bosman employs seem obvious and crude, this only serves to highlight the crudeness and lack of sophistication of the social system which Nongaas and Schalk find themselves a part of. If Bosman is unable to render black experience of whites, he takes pains to impart the ideologies which fuel the psychic separation he, and other white South African writers, have found themselves the victims of.

In "Makapan's Caves" (and in "Unto Dust" and "Marico Scandal", particularly, which I will refer to in brief in order to avoid repeating Lawson's (1982) analysis of Bosman's treatment of race), it is clear that Bosman's overriding aim is to expose the social injustices of apartheid. The story "Unto Dust" (1986) encapsulates a phrase from J.M. Coetzee's *Dusklands* (1974) which says "everywhere differences grow smaller as they come up and we come down" (Gray, 1986: 148). This narrative deals with the fact that the identity of the Marico farmers (and of all pre-democratic white South Africa) was heavily dependent on the distinctions they drew between themselves and black people. To borrow yet again from Coetzee's (1987) 'Jerusalem Prize' Speech,

In the early 1950s, the heady years when the great city of apartheid was still being built, a law was passed making sexual relations between masters and slaves a crime. This was the most pointed of a long string of laws regulating all phases of social life, whose intent was to block all forms of horizontal intercourse between white and black. The only sanctioned intercourse was henceforth to be vertical; that is, to consist in giving and receiving orders (p.97).

This passage, as does 'Unto Dust' (*Unto Dust*, 1986) written thirty years earlier, encapsulates the importance of distance – both social and geographical – in maintaining white superiority over blacks. As Coetzee and Bosman illustrate, this distance was kept by regulating relations between blacks and whites, and enforcing, often ruthlessly, the master-servant concept. In "Unto Dust" a Boer is killed alongside a black, and the by time the war is over and the burghers return to the sight of the skirmish to collect the white man's remains,

...what was left of Hans Welman and the kafir consisted of little more than pieces of sun-dried flesh and the dismembered fragments of bleached skeletons. The sun and wild

animals and birds of prey had done their work. There was a heap of human bones, with here and there leathery strips of blackened flesh. But we could not tell which was the white man and which the kafir (p.19).

Oom Schalk is very distressed at the thought that in death his remains – like those of the deceased Boer – will also be indistinguishable from those of the black man's because it's the distinguishability of blacks from whites, and the perceived differences between the races, which supports the Boer's entire separatist social system. As Lawson (1982) explains, if these differences are shown to be superficial, there is nothing anymore to safeguard the master-identity of the Boer. In the burghers' sifting through the remains of the two dead men in a vain attempt not to have a black man's bones at a white man's Christian burial are reminiscences of the legislation, passed some years later by the National Government, which used criteria such as hair texture in order to distinguish white people from black. In this narrative Bosman makes a very important statement about the flimsiness of identity, and how reliant it is on social forces and power dynamics.

A third narrative which deals directly with race is "Marico Scandal" from *Mafeking Road* (1991). In this story a young man, Gawie Erasmus, is suspected by the community of having Hottentot forebears, and he is ostracised by some of the farmers. At the Drogevllei Debating Society, the schoolmaster suggests that the subject be "that the Bantu should be allowed to develop along his own lines" (p.39). To cite a passage from the story,

Oupa van Tonder then got up and said, the way the schoolmaster put it, the subject was too hard to understand. He proposed, for the sake of the older debaters, who had not gone to school much, that they should be allowed to talk about how the kafirs were getting cheekier every day (p.40).

A confused debate ensues until the schoolmaster, ignorant of the scandal associated with Gawie, calls the young man to speak on behalf of the blacks. There is laughter and mockery amongst the debaters, and ultimately Gawie leaves the debating hall and the Groot Marico, never to return. In his typically off-handed way, Bosman makes a similar point in this story as he does in "Unto Dust" about the superficial nature of social identity and racial ostracism. The comment is made 'inadvertently' during a conversation between two of the farmers, one being convinced of Gawie's 'colouredness':

"He is so coloured," Koos said, "that he even sleeps with a blanket over his head like a kafir does".

It struck me that Koos Deventer's statements were rather peculiar. For, according to Koos, you couldn't tell that Gawie Erasmus was coloured just by looking at his hair and his fingernails. You had to wait until Gawie lay underneath a blanket, so that you saw nothing of him at all (p.38).

Similar to “Unto Dust”, Bosman illustrates the tenuous evidence of ‘difference’ between the races on which the identity of the Boer is based. From these few examples it is evident, firstly, that Bosman had a very specific political agenda which he disguised through perfecting a unique style of storytelling, and secondly, that these stories form an important contribution to the ‘grand narrative’ of ‘new South African’ history through their ability to illuminate the social forces at work amongst a powerful segment of the South African population. In the following chapter I shall focus on Bosman’s storytelling technique in more detail, and on the interesting methods he employs to impart the important socio-historical details contained in his Groot Marico narratives.

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Chapter Three : Bosman the Storyteller

Falsehoods all, but he gave his falsehoods all the ring of truth

*(The Odyssey, Book XIX, line 203)*¹⁰

When people ask me – as they often do, how it is that I can tell the best stories of anybody in the Transvaal (Oom Schalk Lourens said, modestly) then I explain to them that I just learn through observing the way the world has with men and women. When I say this they nod their heads wisely, and say they understand, and I nod my head wisely also, and that seems to satisfy them. But the thing I say to them is a lie, of course.

For it is not the story that counts. What matters is the way you tell it. The important thing to know is just at what moment you must knock out your pipe on your veldskoel, and at what stage of the story you must start talking about the School Committee at Drogevllei. Another necessary thing is to know what part of the story to leave out (p.21).

This passage, which opens “Mafeking Road” (*The Illustrated Bosman*, 1993), is a good example of the way in which Bosman draws attention to his storytelling technique. As I discussed in the previous chapter, if the oftentimes hard-hitting realism of the Groot Marico narratives contrasts with the ‘daydream’ nature of the *plaasroman* genre, Bosman also departs from the genre by reminding his readers that his writing is a series of stories told by an eccentric and unreliable storyteller. There are many examples in the narratives whereby Bosman refers to the craft of storytelling, reminding his audience that what they are reading is fiction, but also, more importantly, reminding them that the fictional nature of the stories does not undermine their significance. In “The Selons Rose” (*Unto Dust*) the protagonist, Marie Dupreez, complains that the stories of Oom Schalk are boring and repetitive, and Oom Schalk, himself, says,

One thing that certain thoughtless people sometimes hint at about my stories is that nothing ever seems to happen in them. Then there is another kind of person who goes even further, and he says that the stories I tell are all stories that he has heard before, somewhere long ago – he can’t remember when, exactly, but somewhere at the back of his mind he knows that it is not a new story
(‘The Selons Rose’, *Unto Dust*, 1988: 234).

In *A Bekkersdal Marathon*’s “Birth Certificate”, Bosman’s narrator says,

Many of these stories that we recalled in Jurie Steyn’s voorkamer as the shadows of the thorn-trees lengthened were based only on hearsay. It was the kind of story that you had heard, as a child, at your grandmother’s knee. But your grandmother would never admit, of course, that she had heard that story at her grandmother’s knee. Oh, no. She could remember very clearly how it all happened, just like it was yesterday. And she could tell you the name of the farm. (...)

¹⁰Quoted by Andre Brink in Nuttall, 1998, p.29

Similarly now, in the voorkamer, ...we also did not think it necessary to explain where we had first heard those stories. We spoke as though we had been actually present at some stage of the affair. (...)

And while the shadows under the thorn-trees grew longer, the stories we told in Jurie Steyn's voorkamer grew, if not longer, then, at least, taller (pp.23-24).

What Bosman does by referring to his own craft in this way is warn his readers not to simply take the narratives at face value. He cautions against interpreting the stories simply as pieces of social realism, and advises his audience to be cognisant of the context in which he was writing, and the particular role storytelling performs in his narratives. Also, importantly, Bosman draws attention to the fact that he drew on various storytelling traditions in order to construct one that uniquely fitted the contemporary South African context by allowing for social commentary. As MacKenzie (1999) points out, the question of Bosman's influences has preoccupied many critics. Vivienne Dickson's study cites South African short-story writers Scully, Fitzpatrick and Blackburn, amongst others, who possibly inspired Bosman to explore the South African milieu, while Edgar Allan Poe and also the 'American humorous tradition' (Twain, Ambrose Pierce, O. Leary and Leacock) influenced Bosman's style (MacKenzie, 1999). As MacKenzie argues, Bosman devised a manner of storytelling which transformed the older, archaic tradition of storytelling in South Africa in such a way that he could accommodate criticism of the socio-political structure.

It is these references which Bosman makes to his brand of storytelling which invalidate criticisms, such as Lewis Nkosi's, which interpret the stories superficially, and fail to perceive the significant difference between author and narrator. In 'The Transplanted Heart' Nkosi says,

Bosman succeeded to a great extent in hiding so well behind the attitudes of his characters, that we are obliged to blame them for the indifference or failure to perceive the full humanity of the blacks. My own conviction is that the blacks did not fully engage Bosman's interest; he had a folklorist attitude toward Africans which combined bad anthropology with vulgar sentimentality: a sort of 'save-the-Bushman-art' campaign without any deeper psychological engagement with the people who created that art (Gray, 1986: 169).

This complaint by Nkosi reflects a failure to recognise Bosman's use of Oom Schalk as a deliberate literary device, and the sophistication of Bosman's usage of irony to comment on race relations in South Africa.

In "The Short Fiction of Herman Charles Bosman" (Gray, 1986) Martin Trump talks about critics whose interpretations of Bosman's fiction are equally as superficial and inaccurate as Lewis Nkosi's. To quote from Trump's essay,

The second misrepresentative response to Bosman's work has come from reaction-

ary white South African press reviewers and through a large number of South African readers who see in the Marico a superb evocation of a rural scene whereby white farmers are continually booting the black people of the district about. Bosman's Marico is, in their eyes, a racist paradise. In fact, Bosman's fiction, by means of this line of interpretation, is co-opted into the corpus of works which vindicate apartheid (Gray, 1986: 169).

This response interprets Bosman's work as straightforward pieces of rural realism, and it reflects a quite astoundingly myopic failure to comprehend the complexity of Bosman's fiction, and the multi-layeredness of his irony. This type of reading neglects to take into account the many 'hints' Bosman drops regarding the mechanisms of his narrative technique. The way in which many of the stories begin, with "Oom Schalk Lourens said," immediately and at the outset alerts the reader to the fact that the story being told emanates from a fictional character, and not an authorial narrative voice (MacKenzie, 1999). Thus distance is established very early on between the voice of the narrator and the sentiments of the author. The reader receives ample warning that Oom Schalk is a flawed and fickle storyteller, and Bosman's audience is assured of nothing other than the fact that Oom Schalk is "the greatest liar that ever trekked" (Gray and MacKenzie, 1999: 12).

As MacKenzie (1999) illustrates, Oom Schalk's role as storyteller is a complex one. Apart from his ideological separateness from Bosman, Oom Schalk's verbal style implies more than one interlocutor. The opening lines of 'Makapan's Caves' are a case in point:

Kafirs? (said Oom Schalk Lourens). Yes, I know them. And they're all the same
(*The Illustrated Bosman*, 1991 : 56).

Clearly, Oom Schalk is having a conversation where the subject of "kafirs" has come up, and Schalk is about to offer his opinion on the subject. What the reader is allowed to do is 'eavesdrop' on these views, which, by their brazen racism, can only be the narrators', and not the authors⁹. While the people whom Oom Schalk is addressing obviously share his racist views, the outrageous and comical nature of his assertions implies that the reader is aware of the irony of his words (MacKenzie, 1999).

As MacKenzie (1999) explains, adding to the complexity of Oom Schalk's role is the fact that his character varies, an element which serves as another reminder not to take his radically racist views at face value. While Schalk, at times, sounds every bit the stereotypical backveld Boer, there are also times when his tone can only be interpreted as self-consciously ironic (MacKenzie, 1999). One of the useful examples MacKenzie cites is from 'Makapan's Caves', which I discussed in some detail in the previous chapter. This "Makapan's Caves" is based on the true story of a conflict between the Boers

⁹ In the previous chapter I cite a paragraph from an essay written by Bosman titled "Aspects of South African Literature" which reflects his sensitivity to the issue of race in South Africa and the problems he perceives in representing 'black' experience.

and Chief Makapan. In the story, two brothers are about to go into battle, and their father offers them some advice:

“Don’t forget to read your Bible, my sons,” he called out as we rode away. “Pray the Lord to help you, and when you shoot, always aim for the stomach.” These remarks were typical of my father’s deeply religious nature, and he also knew that it was easier to hit a man in the stomach than in the head: and it was just as good, because no man can live long after his intestines have been shot away
(*The Illustrated Bosman*, 1991 : 56).

Thus the reader becomes aware that Schalk is not, in fact, as simple a character as he might seem, and that he understands the hypocrisy of the society which he depicts. Through the ludicrous nature of his statements (comparing the “kafir” to the rinderpest, for example), Bosman urges the reader to see beyond Schalk’s words and to appreciate the irony implicit in the text. In addition, Oom Schalk’s masked astuteness and powers of observation become more obvious when contrasted with the ‘genuine’ simplicity and folly of Oom Schalk’s compatriots.

It is necessary, at this point, to provide some examples of how Bosman adapted the short-story genre, and used irony and symbolism to comment on the social situation in South Africa. ‘The Picture of Gysbert Jonker’ from *Unto Dust* (1986) is seldom quoted by Bosman critics, yet it’s a brilliant example of the way Bosman used extended metaphor and subtext to make observations about the Marico boers. In short, the story is about a young man, Gysbert van Jonker, who sees his likeness in a tobacco tin, and believes that the tobacco company used his portrait because of his progressive farming methods. While the other farmers are surprised by Gysbert’s naïvety, they foster this illusion of his which remains for many years. There is a sense of terrible pathos in Gysbert’s attempts to keep looking like the portrait, despite his inevitable ageing – he starts dyeing his hair and beard black, wearing gaudy shirts and cultivating a crooked smile to match the smile on the picture. Gysbert is unfazed by the mockery of the greater community, and he nurtures his fantasy with stubborn determination. It is clear, from the outset, that there are multiple texts at work in this story. Gysbert’s refusal to relinquish the fantasy of his specialness is clearly symbolic of the myth of Afrikaner racial superiority. ‘Oom Schalk’ spells this out:

Gysbert kept up this foolishness for a number of years. And it was, of course, this particular characteristic of his that we admired. We could see from this that he was a real Afrikaner, as obstinate as the Transvaal turfsoil. Even when, with the years, it became difficult for him to compete successfully with his portrait that did not age, so that he had to resort to artificial aids to keep his hair and beard black – then we did not laugh about it. We even sympathised with him in his hopeless struggle against the onslaughts of time (1986, p.168).

While Gysbert represents the foolishness of the belief in a master race, Bosman ‘innocently’ presents a picture of a changing world where industrialisation and technological progresses are increasingly impinging on the white Marico outpost:

“Important things are happening in the world, Oom Schalk,” young Frikkie said.

“You know, culture and all that. That’s why you should go to a film like the one we have just seen. A film with artists in it, and all.”

“Yes, artists,” another young fellow said. “Like an artist that got pointed out to me last time I was in Johannesburg. With his wide hat and corduroy trousers, he looked just like a Marico farmer, except that his beard was too wild. We don’t grow our beards so long in these parts, any more, since that new threshing-machine with the wide hopper came in. That machine is so quick (1986, p.164).

Thus, the city of Johannesburg is not so impossibly far away anymore like it might have been for their forebears, but close enough for the youngsters of the area to be impressed by foreign films and concepts, and to become critical of the old-fashioned ways of the older Boers. Oom Schalk takes the ‘problem’ of encroaching technology further:

We spoke about how the younger generation was losing its self-reliance though – and we started naming some of the things we saw on the shelves around us. Gramophones, we said. And paraffin candles in packets, we said, instead of making your own. And tubes with white grease that you squeezed at the end to polish your plates and spoons with, one of us said. No, it was to brush your teeth with, somebody else interrupted him. And we said that, well, whatever it was for, it was undermining. And we said that our own generation was being sapped, also.

After we had asked the Indian behind the counter to stand to one side, so that we could see better how we were being undermined, Hans Welman pointed to a shelf holding tins of coffee. “Formerly we burnt and ground our own coffee,” Hans Bekker said. “Today – ”

“Before I could walk,” Andries Claassens said, “I used to shred my own tobacco from a black roll. I could cut up plug tobacco for my pipe before I could sharpen a slate-pencil. But now I have to sit with this little bag -” (1986, p.166).

While the farmers’ ignorance and penchant for exaggeration are very amusing, what passages like this one illustrate is the crisis technology poses to the way of life of the Boers. Their life-style and belief-system are heavily dependent on their ongoing isolation from the rest of the country, and by implication, the rest of the world. What Bosman is clearly commenting on is white South Africa’s dismissal of the notions of equality and egalitarianism in its appropriation of power and land. If the farmers are to maintain their self-serving and isolated existence, it is imperative that the Dopper values of their forebears are preserved, and anything which might threaten this (foreign films, radios, education) must be criticised and discouraged. Likewise for broader South Africa – the futility of Gysbert van Jonker dyeing his hair in an attempt to maintain the status quo of his likeness to the picture represents the fruitlessness of the South African government enforcing its segregationist

policies in the face of world-wide trends towards the rejection of racism. The social system of the Groot Marico, like the social system of broader South Africa, depended on its isolation, cohesiveness and self-reliance. Narratives such as 'The Picture of Gysbert Jonker' can be seen to serve as an early warning by Bosman that the myths holding the *volk* together are unnatural, ephemeral and on the brink of collapse as it becomes increasingly difficult to keep the outside world at bay.

'The Music-Maker' from *Mafeking Road* (1991) contains a similar message. Significantly, Bosman starts the narrative by commenting on history:

Of course I know about history – Oom Schalk Lourens said – it's the stuff the children learn at school. Only the other day, at Thys Lemmer's post office, Thys's little son Stoffel started reading out of his history book about a man called Vasco da Gama, who visited the Cape. At once Dirk Snyman started telling young Stoffel about the time when he himself visited the Cape, but young Stoffel didn't take much notice of him. So Dirk Snyman said that that showed you.

Anyway, Dirk Snyman said that what he wanted to tell young Stoffel was that the last time he went down to the Cape a kafir came and sat down right next to him on the tram. What was more, Dirk Snyman said, was that people seemed to think nothing of it (p.32).

In his seemingly off-handed, 'accidental' way, Bosman manages in a single paragraph to make a series of observations about history, knowledge and society. For the farmers of the Marico, 'history' is merely something children learn at school; this type of theoretical knowledge has no efficacy in the bushveld where the only learning that counts is of a practical nature. While this dialogue sums up the farmers' attitude towards what they refer to as 'book learning', seemingly innocuous paragraphs such as this one also serve to illuminate the factors which influenced society in the broader South Africa. What Bosman seeks to illustrate in many of the narratives is the survivalist ethos of the Marico Boers, and the fact that their attitude towards 'blacks' was fuelled to a large extent by their efforts to survive in the veld. Their day-to-day concerns centre around dealing with droughts, combatting the illnesses which variously afflict their livestock, and doing what needs to be done in order to eke out an existence. The reality of life in the semi-desert of the Groot Marico has no room for concepts such as equality and egalitarianism; their survival depends on applying Old Testament values in a selectively uncritical and dogmatic way.

Dirk Snyman's dismissal of Stoffel's Vasco da Gama story illustrates, therefore, much more than simply the Boer's disregard for education; it provides clues to the white Afrikaner ideologies which later resulted in apartheid. Dirk's reference to the black person sitting next to him on the tram at once highlights the racism of the farmers of the area as well as indicating the social changes which threaten their identity. Dirk is less concerned that there was a black person beside him on the tram that he is about the fact that "people seemed to think nothing of it" (p.32). As I discussed in Chapter One, the

Boer's continuing supremacy in a racially divided society depends entirely on the upholding of differences between the races, a factor which depends, in turn, on their physical separation. The fact that a black man was allowed to sit beside Dirk Snyman is a frightening thing because it threatens the very foundations on which the Boer identity rests.

At face value "The Music-Maker" is about a farmer called Manie Kruger who was once "one of the best farmers in the Marico" (p.32) as well as a talented musician. But after reading about a famous musician in history, Manie decides that playing the concertina at bushveld dances isn't good enough for him anymore, and he begins hosting recitals in his *voorkamer*. Manie's attempts to impersonate a 'real' musician from 'overseas' are as amusing as they are pitiable, and the community's good-natured acceptance of his new-found snobbery reflects their ignorance and lack of sophistication. For example,

At last everything was ready and Joel, the farm kafir to whom Manie had given this job, slowly drew the green curtain aside. A few of the younger men called out, 'Middag, ou Manie,' and Jan Terreblanche asked if it wasn't very close and suffocating, sitting there like that behind that piece of green curtain (p.44).

and,

At the end of the recital Manie did not come forward and shake hands with us, as we had expected. Instead, he slipped through behind the green curtain into the kitchen, and sent word that we could come and see him round the back. At first we thought this was a bit queer, but Letta Steyn said it was all right. She explained that in other countries the great musicians and stage performers all received their admirers at the back. Jan Terreblanche said that if these actors used their kitchens for entertaining their visitors in, he wondered where they did their cooking (p.45).

In four pages, "The Music-Maker" makes very astute observations about the realities of life in the Marico bushveld. If Jan Terreblanche, 'spokesman' for the Boer community in this narrative, is ignorant enough to make statements like the one quoted above, then the folly of applying concepts such as egalitarianism to the people of this area is cleverly highlighted. Instead of being annoyed by the new status Manie has awarded himself, the community turns out in full force at his recitals, eating their meals "on candle-boxes and upturned buckets" (p.33) so that Manie can use their chairs for his concerts. Thus, in a seemingly off-handed sentence Bosman illuminates the poverty in which the Marico farmers live, as well as heightening the pathos of the following paragraphs:

Eventually, When Manie Kruger's musical career reached that stage where they took away his plough and the last of his oxen, he sold up what remained of his possessions and left the bushveld, on his way to those great cities that he had so often talked about. It was very grand, the send-off that the Marico gave him. The predikant and the Volksraad member both made speeches about how proud the Transvaal was of her great son. Then Manie replied. Instead of thanking his audience, however, he started abusing

us left and right, calling us a mob of hooligans and soulless Philistines, and saying how much he despised us.

Naturally, we were very much surprised at this outburst, as we had always been kind to Manie Kruger and had encouraged him all we could. But Letta Steyn explained that Manie didn't really mean the things he said. She said it was just that every great artist was expected to talk in that way about the place he came from.

So we knew it was all right, and the more offensive the things were that Manie said about us, the louder we shouted, "Hoor, hoor vir Manie!" There was a particularly enthusiastic round of applause when he said that we knew as much about art as a boomslang. His language was hotter than anything we had ever heard. (...) We could feel that Manie's speech was the real thing. We cheered ourselves hoarse that day (p.36).

The farmers' lack of capacity for critical thought is cunningly illustrated by this depiction of events, and it's through passages such as this one that Bosman makes his social commentary.

Needless to say, Manie's trek to the cities to become famous is unsuccessful, and he ends up playing his concertina outside a bar in Pretoria. Through narratives such as "The Music-Maker" Bosman succeeds in imparting at once the ignorance, naïvete and unabashed racism of the Marico farmers in a way no other writer has managed to do. The points he makes about Manie are two-fold; firstly, by assuring the reader in his typically 'accidental' way that Manie is no different from the rest of the community, Bosman makes a point about the universality of human nature, and about the difficulty of overcoming the social forces which mould our behaviour and thought. For all Manie's delusions about being better than the rest of the community, Manie is a Marico Boer whose *veldskoens* stick out from underneath the curtain, and who, when there is "some trouble with the curtain, (gets) up to kick the kafir" (p.44). Secondly, the fact that Manie doesn't make it as musician in the city can be interpreted as a commentary on the truism that the racist, conservative ideologies of the Boers don't survive when removed from the nucleus of the Groot Marico. By extrapolation, the survival of apartheid in the larger South Africa depended on a closed, repressive social system where the dissemination of knowledge and information was strictly controlled. What Bosman seeks to illustrate is the threat which information and education posed to this system.

The concepts of knowledge and information are regularly referred to in the narratives. "Marico Scandal" in *Mafeking Road* is the story of a young man, Gawie Erasmus, whom the community suspects of being 'coloured.' Bosman uses the situation of a meeting of the Drogevelei Debating Society to illustrate the ignorance which abounds amongst the farmers:

By this time it was dark. Oupa van Tonder, an old farmer who was very keen on debates, lit an oil-lamp that he had brought with him and put it on the table. The schoolmaster took the chair, as usual. He said that, as we all knew, the subject was that the Bantu should be allowed to develop along his own lines. He said he had got the idea for this debate from an article he had read in the *Kerkbode*. Oupa

van Tonder then got up and said, the way the schoolmaster put it, the subject was too hard to understand. He proposed, for the older debaters, who had not gone to school much, that they should just be allowed to talk about how the kafirs in the Marico were getting cheekier every day. The older debaters cheered Oupa van Tonder for putting the schoolmaster in his place (p.48).

Likewise, in "Home from Finishing School," (*Jurie Steyn's Post Office*), Pauline Gerber has just returned to the Marico from 'finishing school' in the Cape, and the farmers are greatly awed by her education and sophistication :

Already Oupa Bekker was weighing in with an historically authentic account of the ruin that got visited on the Van der Sandt family through the attendance of some of its junior members at the Volksgimnasium. The Malopo Van der Sandts, Oupa Bekker explained.

"It's that lorry-driver's assistant," At Naude explained. "He comes and plunks himself down right in front of her, and stands there by the radiator, talking to her as free and easy as you like. So all I can see right now is a bit of the feather on her hat. He's talking, standing on one leg. Anybody would think he's just come out of college, where they teach you flower arrangements and higher-

"Higher sums," Gysbert van Tonder interjected, remembering something of his own primary school curriculum and attaching to it imagined academic elevations, "and higher spelling and higher recitation and higher-" (p.289).

As a final example, "The Rooinek" (*Mafeking Road*) is the story of an Englishman who buys a farm in the Marico. It is shortly after the Anglo-Boer war and the farmers are none too happy about having an Englishman in their midst:

When the Englishman Webber went back to his wagon Koos Steyn and I walked with him. He told us that he had bought the farm next to Gerhardus Grobberlaar and that he didn't know much about sheep and cattle and mielies, but he had bought a few books on farming, and he was going to learn all he could out of them. When he said that I looked away towards the poort. I didn't want him to see that I was laughing. But with Koos Steyn it was otherwise.

"Man," he said, "let me see those books."

Webber opened the box at the bottom of the wagon and took out about six big books with green covers.

"These are very good books," Koos Steyn said. "Yes, they are very good for the white ants. The white ants will eat them in two nights."

(...)

He was always reading in those green books what he had to do. It's lucky that those green books are written in English, and that the Boers can't read them. Otherwise many more farmers would be ruined every year. When his cattle had the heart-water, or his sheep had the blue-tongue, or there were cutworms or stalkborers in his mielies, Webber would look it all up in his books. I suppose that when the kafirs stole his sheep he would look that up, too (p.127).

Through references such as these, Bosman highlights the irrelevance of academic theory in the Marico bushveld, and the concomitant attitudes of the farmers towards books and learning. Here, education is a luxury which cannot be afforded amidst the rigours of farming this hostile landscape. While Bosman

does not condone the hardened racism which goes hand-in-hand with the farmers' rejection of knowledge, his narratives illustrate the basis for their racism, and in highlighting the realities of their social context his stories shed light on important socio-historic truths.

"The Prophet" (*Mafeking Road*, 1988) is a good example of the way Bosman economically imparts a version of South African social reality in a tone which is seemingly light-hearted, but which performs the vital function of debunking the premise on which apartheid rests. The story is about Stephanus van Rensburg who is considered a gifted prophet in the Groot Marico region until an old man by the name of Mosiko arrives on the road to Ramoutsa. While we are not told that Oom Schalk is telling the story, his insightful streak emerges in between phrases such as,

It was the school-children who first started talking about this. I have noticed how often things like this start with the stories of kafirs and children (p.94).

As MacKenzie (1998) explains, a phrase such as this one entrenches his position as one of the Boers he is describing. But diversions such as

(Mosiko) seemed to have nothing but what the sun and the sand and the grass had given to him, and yet that was more than what all the men in the world could give him (p.99),

and,

This is one of the things I have learnt in the Marico, and I don't think you could learn it anywhere else. It is only when you have had a great deal of time in which to do nothing but think and look at the veld and at the sky where there have been no rainclouds for months, that you grow to an understanding of these things (p.94)

remind the reader that in the telling of the tales Schalk has a meta-language; he possesses an insight which his characters do not. He may speak the way that they do and be a member of the Groot Marico community, but there is also a role of leadership being assumed. Schalk does not simply relate stories and repeat conversations like he appears to do; instead, he presents the Marico farmers in a particular way, one which highlights their foolishness, and illuminates the fact that their racial discrimination has no basis. The farmers may call Mosiko a "lazy old kafir" (p.99), but it is clear that it's him whom they defer to, and not Stephanus van Rensburg. After Mosiko insults 'Baas' Stephanus by questioning his prophesying abilities, the latter has no choice but to confront him, and the climax of the story comprises a show-down between the two men. The story is an obvious metaphor for the hostility between blacks and whites in the Marico, but also in the broader South Africa. When asked from whence he has come, Mosiko

would lift up his arm very slowly and point towards the west. There is nothing in the

west. There is only the Kalahari. And from his looks you could easily believe that this old kafir had lived in the desert all his life (p.98).

Thus Bosman establishes Mosiko's identity; he is an African, from Africa. He can survive in the desert, and has been doing so for many years. It is made clear that Mosiko is not the intruder on this particular landscape, yet he finds himself on 'white man's land.' When Mosiko fails to be intimidated by Stephanus's presence, the latter threatens him with violence:

"Kafir," Stephanus said at last, "you have no right to be here on a white man's outspan. We have come to throw you off it. I am going to kick you, kafir. Right now I am going to kick you. You'll see what a white man's boot is like (p.100).

The threat which Stephanus's identity is under clearly symbolises the threatened identity of the boers, and of their claim to the land. When Stephanus raises his foot to kick Mosiko, the last *riem* holding his *veldskoen* together breaks, and he is left a comical figure, standing there with a "broken shoe dangling from his instep" (p.100). The *veldskoen* in this narrative is obviously the symbol of Boer power and authority. When it fails as the means to inflict the will of Stephanus on Mosiko, that being to keep the black man in a subordinate position, Bosman is making a clear observation about the waning power of white people in the larger South Africa. Like the *veldskoen*, Boer ideology, under the strain of changing times, is starting to come undone. Not only do 'blacks' sit next to white people on trains, they "wear collars and ties in Johannesburg and walk on the pavements reading newspapers" (p.95). Stephanus's failed attempt at reinstating a social order which is under threat represents the violent methods used by the South African government to enforce apartheid laws, while Stephanus limping home after the foiled show-down symbolises the inevitable future, as Bosman anticipated it, of apartheid. The value of the Marico stories lies in the fact that they probe the heart of the belief-system of the Boers, uncovering the attitudes which fuelled apartheid thinking in a way which historical or sociological studies cannot.

It is necessary, at this point, to return to Sole's (1991) analysis of history versus story in order to further discuss the excerpts I have cited. As I explained in some detail in the previous chapter, Sole (1991) argues that, while literature does not have the same reference to paradigm as history does, it functions through "metaphorical, symbolic and allusive procedures," and in so doing has the ability, in certain circumstances, to "probe more to the heart of things than sociological or historical studies" (Sole, 1991: 22). While Sole's history-story essay was written in response to a particular genre, any fiction which, consciously or not, posits itself as a counter to an existing ideology is susceptible to similar pitfalls by virtue of its essential radicalness. Lewis Nkosi's (1975) argument that Bosman's black characters receive only a marginal treatment is a case in point. If, as Sole (1991) points out, Black Consciousness fiction gave black and white South Africans equal representation, the political thrust of the novels would be neutralised. Similarly, if Bosman's fiction is to be seen (and I believe it

should be) as a valid and important sociological probe into the heart of apartheid ideology, the inclusion of the 'opposing tribe' in any way other than a peripheral one would undermine the insights the fiction has to offer. The fact that there is a pronounced sense of 'otherness' regarding blacks in Bosman's fiction is what makes it valuable as historical artefact. While the narratives unapologetically reflect the racism of the Marico farmers, it is the way in which the racism is recounted that makes the fiction subversive.

What critics like Nkosi (1975) overlook is the fact that, given the 'otherness' of black people in 'white'-run South Africa, Bosman's stories challenge this 'otherness' in significant ways – stylistically, by presenting white and black South Africans in an equally stereotypical manner, thematically, by emphasising the superficial nature of the difference between blacks and whites, and also by emphasising that there are as many versions of 'truth' as there are people. Bosman's use of a fictional narrator such as Oom Schalk serves as a commentary on the flawed nature of human memory, and a reminder of what Minkley and Rassool (1998) describe as the significant shortcomings of using orally recounted stories to translate memory into history. David Goldblatt's discovery, in the early 1960s, that Bosman wrote about real people who confirmed some of the details of the Groot Marico narratives does not suggest that they contain nothing but 'truth'. What this finding verifies is the fact that Bosman's narratives contain a version of truth, and Bosman's consciousness of his craft is illuminated in lines such as the one from "Mafeking Road" (1993, p.21): "...another thing to know is what part of the story to leave out."

This line from "Mafeking Road" parallels Ndebele's (1991) essay on the role storytelling has to play in literature. To reiterate, Ndebele advises black South African fiction writers on the most effective way of relaying information through literature, encouraging writers to use their imagination in depicting social reality instead of simply conveying journalistic-style 'facts'. The difference (as I explicate in Chapter One) is between getting an audience to *think* about what they are reading as opposed to simply recognising the information and engaging only marginally with the text, or worse, having a defensive response to its socio-political message. These 'clues' to Bosman's storytelling practice refer both to his awareness of the vast realms of consciousness which his narratives preclude, and also to a consciously crafted technique of storytelling which uses sophisticated narrative devices to impart a social message. To quote again from 'Rediscovery of the Ordinary' (1991), Ndebele draws a distinction between

...art that sells ideas to people, and that whose ideas are embraced by the people, because they have been made to understand them through the evocation of lived experience in all its complexities. In the former case, the readers are anonymous buyers; in the latter, they are equals in the quest for truth. All the writer needs to understand is that he can only be genuinely committed to politics through a commit-

ment to his art (p.16).

Ndebele's theories (again, as I discuss in Chapter One) were formulated in response to what he perceived as the inadequacy of Black Consciousness writing to evince social change due to its creative short-comings. If Ndebele's argument for writing fiction which can inspire critical thought due to its artfulness is applied to Bosman's fiction, Nkosi's criticism of Bosman's "anthropological clichés" (Gray, 1986: 169) is invalidated. Through an ingenious use of irony Bosman both distances himself from his narrator and distances his narrator from his audience by undermining the fictional conspiracy which is usually set up between a fictional narrator and the reader. Employing Marico farmers as his speakers is a clever 'masking' device for Bosman, which serves the dual purpose of reminding the reader that Oom Schalk and Jurie Steyn are not the same as the author, as well as capturing what Pereira (1985) calls the "ambience of the story-teller's direct and intimate contact with his audience" (Gray, 1986: 103).

As I said in the previous chapter, Bosman (particularly in the Voorkamer stories where there is no single narrator) beguiles his reader into believing s/he is right there in the Marico bushveld, partaking in the amusement of an ordinary afternoon. Recreating 'the' situation through an authentic (re)presentation of the afternoons which inspired Bosman's Groot Marico narratives is a clever way of capturing the imagination of his audience to an extent that they are 'tricked' into engaging with his vital social and political message. Bosman does not adopt the persona of historian, as critics such as Nkosi seem to assume; on the contrary, as Gray (1986) explains, Bosman was foremostly a storyteller, and he developed his storytelling technique as a sort of ongoing commentary on itself and on the handling of his themes. The apparent 'looseness' of the Groot Marico pieces is part of Bosman's serious exploration of the values of a segment of Afrikaner society. Oom Schalk's line from "The Selons Rose" (1988), "somewhere in the back of his mind he knows that it is not a new story" (p.234) is one of many clues, by Bosman, to read his stories not as literal evocations of a scene, but rather as fabulistic representations of a community of people.

Bosman's Marico farmers are less developed, individualised characters than they are the representatives of the attitudes of a sector of white South Africans, and it is these attitudes which Bosman seeks to portray and to criticise. What Nkosi and the critics who view Bosman's work as a kind of rationale for apartheid mistakenly assume is that Bosman's narratives popularise racism, both because he depicts it with humour, and also because he refrains from openly condemning the social structure which he exposes. In reading Bosman this way, Nkosi erroneously categorises Bosman along with historians such as Gustav Preller, who used an accumulation of individual memories and personal events to construct a biased version of South African history (Hofmeyr, 1998). What Preller sought to achieve was a comprehensive account of the details surrounding the Great Trek and Afrikaner history

by searching his own memory and the memories of contemporaries in order to create an accurate, composite story. As I discuss in the previous chapter, such an 'accurate' account of events is untenable in light of the ideological presumptions which influence the way in which we perceive and record the past. Yet for Preller, as Hofmeyr (1998) explains, personal experience was the very stuff of history, and he made no attempt to communicate the subjectivity of his voice, nor the issues of power implicit in his opinions.

Preller's position as one of the memory-making Afrikaners had the powerful effect of imposing strictures on how events could be represented. As Hofmeyr (1998) points out, Preller's work, in its inversions, silences, repressions and displacements, institutionalises forgetfulness as much as recall. Contrarily, there are lines in Bosman's narratives whose evocation of memory on the part of white South Africans would probably cause more than a little discomfort and shame. To quote a few of these lines,

...during those ninety minutes Manie left his seat only once. That was when there was some trouble with the curtain and he got up to kick the kafir
 ("The Music-maker", *Mafeking Road*, 1991: 97)

"I'll kick him all the way to Zeerust. It is bad enough when kafirs wear collars and ties in Johannesburg and walk on the pavements reading newspapers. But we won't allow this sort of thing in the Marico" ("The Prophet", *Mafeking Road*, 1991: 95)

...there was a time when the chief of the Mtosa kafirs passed him in the veld and said "good morning" without taking his leopard skin off his head and calling Krisjan baas. Krisjan was fined ten pounds by the magistrate and had to pay the doctor during the three months the Mtosa walked with a stick
 ("The Gramophone", *Mafeking Road*, 1991: 101).

If there is silence, in Bosman's narratives, where there should be black voices, it is a silence which does not seek to hide the truth, but rather which adapts itself to invoking that truth.

In his very useful study of the South African short-story written in the oral style, Craig MacKenzie (1999) refers to *skaz*, a term coined by Russian Formalist Boris Eichenbaum. *Skaz* refers to narrative prose which "reveals an orientation toward the oral speech of the narrator (...); a form which (...) makes the narrator as such a real personage" (1998: 4). The *skaz* narrative, explains MacKenzie, utilises a vocabulary, word order and set of verbal inflections designed to represent the speech of the narrator. In this genre, the narrator is as important as the story s/he tells because s/he is part of the story and has total authorial license regarding what gets told and what left out. The fact that a story is being told is foregrounded, with the result that the reader is made aware of the way in which 'reality' is being mediated by a subjective narrator. As MacKenzie explains in the case of *skaz* narratives, the fictional narrator is usually accompanied by a fictional audience. In the opening lines of some of his

narratives it is clear that Oom Schalk is in the middle of a conversation, and the impression is created of the reader having ‘dropped in’ for a quick chat or a story. Two examples are “In the Withaak’s Shade” and “Willem Prinsloo’s Peach Brandy,” respectively:

Leopards? – Oom Schalk Lourens said – Oh, yes, there are two varieties on this side of the Limpopo (*Mafeking Road*, 1991 : 20)

No (Oom Schalk Lourens said) you don’t get flowers in the Groot Marico. It is not a bad district for mealies, and I once grew quite good onions in a small garden made next to the dam. But what you really call flowers are rare things (*Mafeking Road*, 1991 : 13).

Schalk is obviously having conversations in which a particular subject has come up, and he’s been ‘reminded’ of a story which he’s about to relate. While this technique is most pronounced in the Voorkamer stories where the narrator functions, at most, as minutes secretary, there is almost always someone in the ‘Oom Schalk’ stories who relieves Schalk for a while – either to substantiate or to negate his version of what happened. The impression is created that the reader is one of the inhabitants of the Marico and is being invited, in a sense, to believe or not believe the tales. In “In the Withaak’s Shade” Schalk says,

To make matters worse, Krisjan Lemmer was there, too, and when I got to the part of my story where the leopard lay down beside me, Krisjan Lemmer winked at me. You know that kind of wink. It let me know that there was now a new understanding between us, and that we could speak in future as one Marico liar to another. I didn’t like that (*Mafeking Road*, 1991 : 22).

Thus, while Oom Schalk’s persona as ‘legitimate’ Marico inhabitant is established through his speech, his attitudes and the parochial nature of his stories, Bosman reminds his reading audience that ‘reality’ is being presented in a particular way. Even when a story is as implausible as “In the Withaak’s Shade” is, Bosman introduces a level of irony which negates any possibility that it might be true. In order for Oom Schalk and his acquaintances to be accepted as ‘authentic’ bards, Bosman had to write in ‘their’ voices, and his diction is clearly that of the Marico inhabitants. In this way, a reader is seduced into believing the farmers’ stories, while at the same time being assured that they can’t possibly be true. In the Bushveld stories where Oom Schalk is the speaker, and the Voorkamer stories where everybody speaks, the ‘codes’ which Bosman uses are those of the Marico farmers: his diction is simple, he uses short sentences and words, and he employs an idiosyncratic word order which creates the impression of his sentences being translated directly from Afrikaans. He frequently uses Afrikaans words where there isn’t a satisfactory English equivalent, and this stylistic technique manages to capture both the atmosphere of the voorkamer, and the nuances of Afrikaner speech and humour. By using the diction of the Marico farmers Bosman gives the tales a uniquely authentic feel,

and also separates himself as writer from Oom Schalk, narrator. A random example taken from 'The Budget' (*Jurie Steyn's Post Office*, 1971) exemplifies Bosman's style:

"But that's what I've been saying also," Oupa Bekker persisted. "I say, why doesn't Jurie rather go in his mule-cart?"

"You know, Oupa," Jurie said, talking very quietly.

"You have been an ouderling for many years, and we all respect you in the Groot Marico. We also respect your grey hairs. But you must not lose that respect through- through talking about things you don't understand."

Oupa Bekker tightened his grip on his tambotie-wood walking stick (and) sat up very stiffly on the riempies bench, then (p.17).

To the best of his ability, writing in English, Bosman remains true to the idiom of his Afrikaans protagonists. Through this technique he creates his fictional audience – the men who are gathered around Oom Schalk, listening to his stories – and he makes this audience known by consciously using its racist ideology and language, and employing terms of reference which would be different from his own.

Consequently, there are different levels of irony at play: between Bosman and his speakers; his speakers and their immediate audience in the voorkamer or the post office; between his immediate audience and his larger, reading audience, and between his characters, themselves. Irony performs an intrinsic function in Bosman's narratives in that it is the tool he uses to criticise South Africa's racist social structure. As I have said earlier in the chapter, the 'silences' which abound in Bosman's fiction do not seek to hide the truth, but instead have as their aim the invocation of truth, and it is what Swearingen (1999) calls irony's "presence of absence" (p.19) which illuminates these truths. Linda Hutcheon, in her analysis of the function of irony in literature, explains:

...irony happens in the space *between* (and including) the said and the unsaid; (...) The ironic meaning is not, then, simply the unsaid meaning, and the unsaid is not always a simple inversion or opposite of the said... it is always different – *other than* and more than the said (1994, p12).

The use of irony in Bosman's text is what allows him to impart vast realms of meaning in a very short narrative space, and it is the space between his 'said' and his 'unsaid' which makes his fiction interesting and gives it socio-historical significance. Hutcheon's (1994) description of irony as the "intentional transmission of both information and evaluative attitude other than what is explicitly presented" (p.13) is relevant to lines such as

"The curse of the Transvaal," At Naude explained, stretching himself out further along the grass, and yawning, "the curse of the Transvaal is the indolence of the kafirs" (*Mafeking Road*, 1991: 92);

...there was a time when the chief of the Mtosa kafirs passed him in in the veld and he said "Good morning" without taking the leopard skin off his head and calling Krisjan baas. Krisjan was fined ten pounds by the magistrate and had to pay for the doctor during the three months the Mtosa chief walked with a stick
(*Mafeking Road*, 1991: 101)

and

"After that Mchopi messenger had crawled about four times through the same stretch of thorns behind the police station," Patrol-man Duvenage said to Oupa Bekker, "I decided to give him a break. So I went up to him and kicked him twice, and told him to hand over the letter (...)."

Oupa Bekker said he could see, from that, that there was an unkind streak in Patrol-man Duvenage. Thinking it was funny to let that Mchopi go on crawling through the thorns all the time, when he could have gone and dealt with him right away
(*"Border Bad-man"*, *Jurie Steyn's Post Office*, 1991: 343).

Through passages as rich in irony as these, Bosman's message exceeds the language he uses. By means of this technique, he documents truths such as institutionalised violence against black people and the humiliation countless numbers endured, and condemns the ideological system which was formalised by apartheid. In this manner Bosman succeeds in recording social reality in a way no other South African short-story writer has managed to do.

The relation between irony and politics forms an important part of Ernst Behler's (1990) study of irony. Behler says,

The ironic manner of expression can be described as attempting to transcend the restrictions of normal discourse and straightforward speech by making the ineffable articulate, at least indirectly, through a number of verbal strategies, and accomplishing what lies beyond the reach of direct communication (p.111).

The difficulty in imparting social atrocities such as apartheid effectively through art means that the writer might choose to manipulate language in order to get his/her message across effectively. Bosman's use of irony comprises a response to the difficulties inherent in presenting historical tragedy by means of 'straightforward speech'. In many ways, the realities of apartheid South Africa lie beyond the realm of direct communication and require the use of silence and subtext in order to be communicable. Bosman's reluctance to condemn, in a straightforward manner, the inhumane nature of apartheid ideology reflects a sensitivity to the shortcomings of language to transmit certain truths. In an essay entitled 'Silence in my Father's House' (1998), Steve Robbins uses the example of the Jewish holocaust to discuss the problems inherent in representing catastrophes such as Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa in narrative form. Robbins explains that attempts to seek human motives, explanations and justifications for inhumane acts committed on such a grand scale descend into idiocy

and obscenity. Bosman's use of irony gives the narratives what Hutcheon (1994) calls an evaluative edge, and succeeds in evoking an emotional response without lapsing into the 'the obscene'.

The different levels of irony at work (between Bosman and narrator; narrator and immediate audience; narrator and larger, reading audience; immediate audience and larger, reading audience) gives the narratives a complex, multi-layered feel, and in so doing allows them to reflect on the complexity of segregationist politics in South Africa. While his silences and subtexts undoubtedly criticise racial inequality, they also seek to explain apartheid's broader political context. Through some of his narratives which have racial conflict as their theme ("Unto Dust," "Makapans's Caves" and "The Prophet", for example), Bosman illuminates hardened white attitudes towards blacks in terms of the survival ethics of a threatened society which adopts ruthless methods in order to preserve itself. Through painting a broader picture, one which depicts some of the historical forces which affected South Africa's social structure, Bosman succeeds in shedding light on the origins of apartheid. What many of his narratives recognise is the fact that racial conflict is vital for the maintenance of a separate white society. As Lawson (1982) explains,

Conflict polarises and strengthens the sense of racial identity, and therefore not only unifies the white community against a common enemy but also plays a vital role in reaffirming the white community's sense of itself (Gray, 1986: 146).

While Bosman sheds some light on apartheid by documenting the conflict between black and white, he also negates the differences between the races which formed such a fundamental part of apartheid ideology. Again, he employs irony to transmit these important points. "Unto Dust" is probably the best example of the paranoia surrounding white identity. As Lawson (1982) suggests, Bosman's Marico farmers are very aware of the fact that, in *Duskland's* Jacobus Coetzee's words, "everywhere differences grow smaller as they come up and we come down" (Coetzee, 1974). In "Unto Dust" Oom Schalk has a malaria-induced nightmare that the world is "a big burial ground" (p.16) where whites and blacks become unified by death. This nightmare is at the heart of apartheid thinking because the maintenance of segregation depends upon innate differences between blacks and whites. As Lawson (1982) explains, it is not the prospect of death that frightens Schalk as much as the prospect of losing the white identity which he so carefully preserves. Schalk says,

...I was very glad when I recovered from the fever, to think that we Boers had properly marked-out places on our farms for white people to be laid to rest in, in a civilised Christian way, instead of having to be buried just anyhow, along with a dead wild-cat, maybe, or a Bushman with a clay pot, and things (p.16).

Through passages such as this one Bosman uses irony to illustrate the social nature of the differences between black and white, thereby commenting on and criticising the social situation in broader South Africa. The ephemeral nature of racial differences, and irony of Schalk's great relief that white people

are buried separately from black, become clear as the story progresses: Hans Welman and a black warrior are killed in the same spot, and when Welman's comrades return to give him a Christian burial, they're dismayed to find that they can't tell the skeletons apart. Nonetheless, the men begin to sift through "pieces of sun-dried flesh and the dismembered fragments of bleached skeletons" (p.19) in an attempt to separate the men. Thus Bosman comments on the futility of the distinctions between black and white which perform such a fundamental role in preserving the separation of the races. The tension between what the narratives say and what they mean comprises a large-scale commentary on politics in South Africa, and exists as a motif through many of the Bushveld stories. To quote Hutcheon (1994) again, irony confers "an attitude toward both the said and the unsaid" (p.11), and to not engage with Bosman's ironic condemnation of apartheid is to overlook his attitude towards the "unsaid"; in other words, his rural, 'realist' evocation of apartheid South Africa is the means he uses to have his message exceed his language. Through his use of irony Bosman succeeds in expressing the inexpressible.

Bosman's use of irony to explore varying levels of consciousness amongst his Marico protagonists is even more pronounced in the Voorkamer series, written approximately a generation after the 'Schalk Lourens' stories. As MacKenzie (1999) points out, the South African short-story changed markedly after the Second World War, its style becoming social realist, and its locale becoming urban. It's important to acknowledge the difference between the Oom Schalk stories which Bosman wrote in his earlier years, and the Voorkamer stories written a generation later. Unlike the Oom Schalk stories which comprise a leisurely exploration of storytelling and society within a particular South African context, Bosman's Voorkamer stories are a significant reflection of the quickening pace of industrialisation in South Africa, and the social changes which took place during that time. MacKenzie (1999) quotes Gillian Siebert's review of *Jurie Steyn's Post Office* and *A Bekkersdal Marathon* (both 1971):

In the gap between the world of Oom Schalk and *Jurie Steyn's Post Office* Bosman shows, as no other South African writer has done, the passage of twenty-five years on his people and his country (p.158).

Unlike the 'Oom Schalk' stories which depict an established and workable social system (albeit, one based on survival), the Voorkamer narratives have a different atmosphere. Schalk, as fixed fictional narrator, is replaced in these stories by a group of farmers who are regulars in Jurie's Steyn's post office, and who comment, in turn, on various topics and issues. What the narratives connote is a less cohesive social environment, and emphasis shifts from a single 'bard' telling stories to disagreements and misunderstandings between the characters who wait for the government lorry to arrive from Bekkersdal. While these misunderstandings provide Bosman with a rich source of comic material, they can be interpreted as an interesting reflection of a society teetering on the edge of collapse as it

becomes less and less tenable to make a reasonable living in this semi-desert landscape. As MacKenzie (1999) explains, the conversation moves back and forth amongst the characters without being satisfactorily resolved, and issues are left hanging in the air. “Young Man in Love” (*Jurie Steyn’s Post Office*, 1988) is a good example of the misunderstandings, deliberate or otherwise, between the characters in the voorkamer, and the talking at cross purposes which abound in the Voorkamer narratives:

“You won’t listen to me,” Oupa Bekker said. “You’ll never let me finish what I was going to say. Always, you just let me get so far. Then somebody says something foolish, and so I can’t get to the important thing.” (...)

At this point, Oupa Bekker was interrupted once more (p.294)

and

Gysbert van Tonder, who always liked getting straight down to things, was the first to talk.

“Nice bit of rain you’ve been having out your way, Johnny,” Gysbert van Tonder remarked. “Dams should be pretty full, I’d imagine.”

“Oh yes, indeed,” Johnny Coen answered.

“Plenty of water in the spruit too, I should think,” Gysbert continued.

“Yes, that’s very true,” Johnny Coen replied.

“New grass must be coming along all right in the vlakte where you burnt,” Gysbert van Tonder went on.

“Yes, very nicely,” Johnny agreed.

Gysbert van Tonder grew impatient.

“What’s the matter with you, man – can’t you talk?” Gysbert demanded.

“You know all right what I am trying to say. Have you seen her since she’s been back?”

“I saw her yesterday,” Johnny Coen said (p.296).

There is a subtle unease in these narratives as what can be called the homogeneity of the group of farmers is called into question. In Bosman’s ‘Schalk Lourens’ narratives the social situation in the Groot Marico has a feeling of permanence: the houses might be modest, the community poor and the Boers’ pastimes antiquated, but there is a sense of a community firmly in place, and of the farmers overcoming the hardships of bushveld life. If Bosman hints, in earlier narratives, that changes are coming¹⁰, the Voorkamer narratives reflect that they have arrived. While the farmers in Oom Schalk’s stories are content in their deliberate shunning of the world and its various progressions in technology and thought, the Voorkamer farmers are no longer able to hang on to the idealised past of their forebears, and there is a sense of unease as the future encroaches on their world. In the same decade in which the Voorkamer stories were written, the racist ideologies represented in the ‘Oom Schalk’ narratives became legislated, and the Voorkamer stories reflect what MacKenzie (1999) describes as a new sense of urgency in South African fiction of the time.

¹⁰ These clues provided by Bosman are discussed in detail in Chapter One

Relevant to a dissertation which argues that Bosman's work comprises a significant socio-political 'window' on a segment of South African society is an essay by Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool titled "Orality, Memory and Social History in South Africa" (1998). In this essay Minkley and Rassool discuss the problems inherent in a 'social history' approach to filling in history's 'black holes'. They discuss the reworking of memory into narrative through converting the oral histories of 'ordinary' people into textual form, and talk about the importance of engaging with the form, structure and processes of memory. As Hofmeyr (1994) explains, the 'social history' approach mines oral testimonies for their 'facts' without paying enough attention to the different forms of interpretation and intellectual traditions which inform these 'facts'. In addition, as Minkley and Rassool (1998) explain, oral history becomes a source onto which the 'mathematics' of history are imposed, and the result is that this history is less conversational narrative than it is dramatic monologue.

While Gustav Preller, for example, presents his 'dramatic monologue' as a series of 'micro-truths' which form a composite historical whole, the structure of Bosman's narratives reflect an awareness of the power dynamics which affect the way we interpret the present, and recall and edit the past. Instead of using a single narrator which would mask the subjective, idiosyncratic nature of memory, Bosman employs a series of narrators whom he switches around and uses as dramatic foils to one another. Through depicting the divergent ways in which different characters such as Oupa Bekker and the school-teacher, for example, interpret the same event, Bosman highlights the social processes of memory, and an individual's socially determined tendency to delete and embellish the truth. By highlighting these social processes Bosman also draws attention to himself as a flawed and subjective recorder of memory. Despite the verisimilitude of his storytelling technique, through his sophisticated use of irony Bosman reminds his audience that he was not one of the farmers, but rather someone imposing his storytelling methods on the 'ordinary' people whom he lived amongst for a time.

Bosman's reluctance to employ a single narrator reflects an awareness of different forms of interpretation, and of the problems inherent in seeing orally recounted history as a straightforward 'bridge' between the recorders of history and the voice of the community. As much as possible, he gives his speakers equal opportunity to tell their version of events. If, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, there is not a Bechuana or a Mchopi drinking coffee in Jurie Steyn's post office, it is not because Bosman sought to ignore or marginalise the black people who lived in the Marico, but out of the necessity of preserving, to the best of his ability, the historical authenticity of the narratives. His aim was to provide a commentary on the ideologies of the Marico farmers, and this ideology consisted of the enforcement of social separation of the races in order for the Boers to retain their sense of identity. What Bosman does is depict the nature of the separation, but he does not, as I have argued, claim to present any definitive 'truth'; at best, he presents orally-recounted memories in such a way as

to incite criticism of the social system he portrays. Bosman's treatment of both blacks and whites is consistent with his storytelling technique: no single voice is presented as the 'master' voice; rather, the erratic and quirky opinions of a variety of characters are melded together to present an anecdotal composition of a version of the past. If his black characters, in Nkosi's (1975) words are "flat, mechanical, sub-human clowns" (p. 169), they are no more flat or mechanical than Bosman's white farmers, whose character development is more often than not limited to the way they handle an automatic mealie-planter. In his treatment of all his characters, it is clear that what Bosman seeks to highlight is the inability of the Boers to see beyond the stereotypes associated with black people. His depiction of blacks, like his depiction of whites, is congruous with his fabilistic storytelling approach in which his Marico setting exists as the locale for rendering moral and political meanings.

If the Groot Marico is microcosmic South Africa, this locale can be extrapolated to represent the effects of power on consciousness and ideology. Bosman's Groot Marico narratives reflect a consciousness of the fact that, within a context of colonialism, land appropriation and political and social injustice such as South Africa's, 'history' is in many ways synonymous with 'story'. If Bosman's stories seem like "old stories, which have been told before" (1988, p.23) (and which get told again and again, in different ways, throughout the collection), their fabilistic quality mirrors the myths and ideological renderings which have influenced white history. As Oom Schalk explains, "it's not the story that counts, but the way you tell it" (1988, p.21). The way Bosman told it, he succeeded in challenging this history by presenting the false ideologies which fuelled those myths, and in so doing created awareness of what remains to be said.

Conclusion

For many years, while the Afrikaner-headed National Party was in power, the 'facts' of South African history were those justifying white appropriation of the land, and reinforcing the various myths which fuelled white from black segregation. Within a political context such as this one, many writers have been obliged to use their art as a weapon of social change, and have crafted their work in such a way that it best exposes and condemns the realities of life under apartheid. This has led both to the development of what Ndebele calls "unimaginative literature" (1991, p.16), as well as the unimaginative *appraisal* of literature, the latter having concerned itself less with how a particular piece of fiction fares as a work of art than how it fits into the political struggle.

Underlying *Dancing the Tiekiedraai* is an examination of the function of literature in the context of apartheid South Africa. I have done this through one specific example, Herman Charles Bosman, with a view to illuminating one of the ways in which the socio-political context of the apartheid era influenced South African writing. The present time, roughly seven years since South Africa attained a democratic government, is undoubtedly an exciting one in literary terms because it offers new opportunities and poses new challenges to writers and theoreticians alike. The emergence of new post-apartheid literary works and a concomitant shift in paradigm regarding literary appreciation afford a good opportunity to relook at some of the older writing, and 'see' it anew in the context of changes in literary theory.

Renewed interest in the narratives of Herman Charles Bosman, evidenced in the glossy, re-edited Anniversary editions of his work, signifies that perhaps the time is right to look at what previous critics contributed to our understanding of this writer, and also to address aspects of his writing which have been neglected. While existing criticisms of Bosman's fiction acknowledge his skill as a storyteller and the proficiency with which he employed particular narrative techniques, they have largely overlooked the fundamentally political angle of his work. What most criticisms of Bosman's narratives fail to take into account is the context in which he wrote, and the innovativeness of his method of documenting social truths. The composition of Bosman's bushveld narratives is an excellent example of how one South African writer utilised the craft of storytelling to make very important observations about a segment of South African society.

While *Dancing the Tiekiedraai* is by no means an exhaustive analysis of Bosman's bushveld stories, it does pave the way for more specialised interpretations of this writer's work by presenting new structures which allow the narratives to be analysed in a different light. This thesis challenges earlier perceptions of Bosman's work, ones which served to typecast him in a way that put limits on his validity as a storytelling 'historian'. It opens new avenues for interpreting this writer's work by

arguing that he was an important literary figure not only for his storytelling abilities and the inroads he made into the acceptance of South African literature generally, but also for the 'memory' contained in the Groot Marico stories and the role they have to play in the 're-writing' of South African history. By representing that – difficult to narrate and easily forgotten – aspect of South African life, Bosman goes a long way towards illuminating the social context in which apartheid was born. For this reason the bushveld narratives are an important reminder of a past all South African people share, and one which needs to be understood as well as acknowledged.

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